

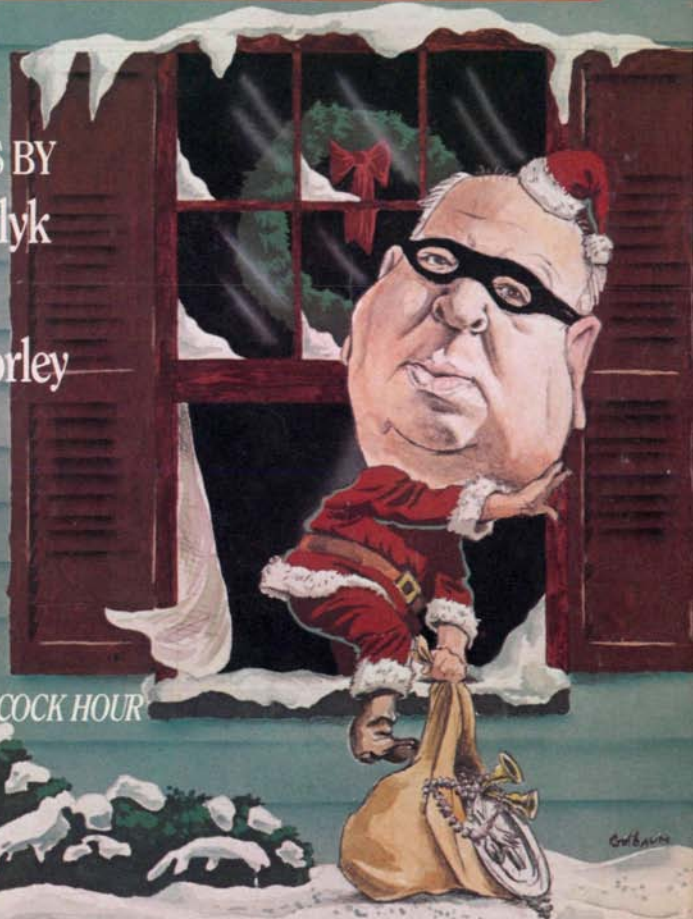
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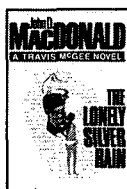
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 31, No. 1, January, 1986. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., \$1.95 per copy. Annual subscription \$19.50 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$23.00 elsewhere payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 1932, Marion, O. 43305. Call (614)383-3141 with questions regarding your subscription. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. © 1985 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Form 3579 to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 1932, Marion, Ohio 43305. In Canada return to 628 Monmouth Rd., Windsor, Ontario N8Y3L1. ISSN: 0002-5224.

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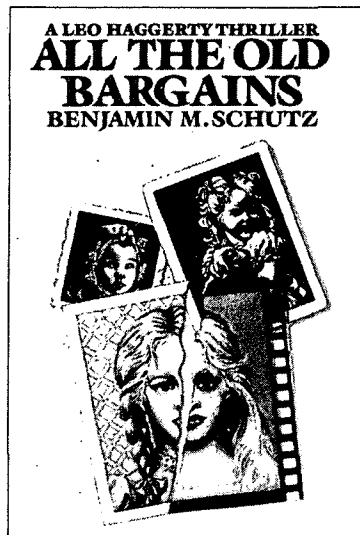
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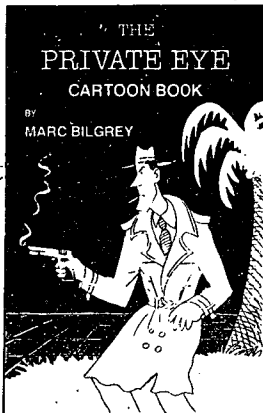
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FICTION

The Unsolved Mystery at Box 29

by Joseph E. Taylor

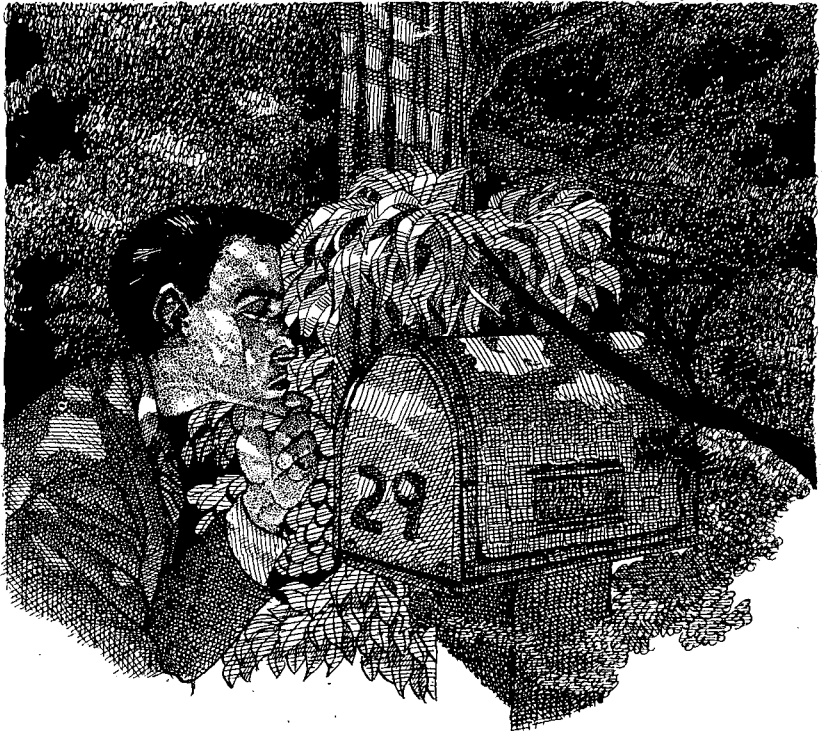


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The rural route carrier on Route 13, a postal employee for thirty years, was retiring. It was a blue, crisp morning, and he was breaking in a new carrier—young, long-haired Hank Meyers, who was a bit fat for his age.

Looking the new man over, the old carrier passed an opinion to the postmaster. "Route 13 will take the lard off his tail."

The postmaster wagged his head. He seldom gave his opinions, but he and the old carrier eyed each other's bristling grey crewcuts knowingly, in silent disapproval of the young man's abundant curling locks.

Hank had brought a new four-wheel-drive Scout to the job and had parked the shiny yellow vehicle alongside the carrier's old Ford behind the post office. "Might as well get your rig used to the route," said the old man as they loaded their sorted mail into the back seat of the Scout.

The sky in the east was a thin orange sliver as they pulled onto Main Street, and the old carrier leaned back against the new creaky plastic cushions.

"Turn right at the next crossroad."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't 'sir' me, boy."

"Don't 'boy' me."

The old man laughed. "This reminds me of my first day on the job. I took over from a fellow who had started out with a mule. His name was Silvester Fox, and when I asked why he'd used a mule, he said that in his day you couldn't get a car through Virginia's muddy roads any better than General Burnside got his army through."

"Who was General Burnside?"

"Never mind," said the old carrier as he gave instructions for stopping at the first mailbox. Obviously the kid wasn't bright.

"What about the mud?"

"No problem nowadays. The whole route is either blacktop or gravel, but it wasn't in Silvester's day."

Route 13 ran through the foothills of the Blue Ridge. People along the way were polite, but eyed the new man curiously. Hank made notes of the turns in a pocket notebook. One such turn took them to a rather high elevation along a narrow gravel road lined with oak, pine, and cedar. On this road they came to an open plateau containing an ancient two story brick house with a huge stone chimney on one side and a high pitched roof that was painted

green. The mailbox carried a name in faded white letters: T. HOPKINS.

On the entrance road leading from the house, Tyson Hopkins was working on the engine of a pickup truck. He threw down a wrench, brushed his hands on his jeans, and walked over to the Scout. He looked in at the old carrier. "Riding in style with your own driver, eh? No wonder the cost of stamps has gone up."

The old man laughed and introduced the new carrier. "This here is Hank Meyers. He'll be stuffing your mailbox from now on."

Tyson shuffled his feet and spat tobacco juice. "That's fine, now maybe I'll get something besides junk mail and bills."

Tyson shook hands with Hank, sandpaper calluses against smooth palm. Then he slapped the old man on his knee and wished him luck.

They drove on about a quarter of a mile, where the road turned westward from the hills, until they came to a brush-choked trail. "Go straight ahead," said the old man.

"I'm not driving in there. It would scratch the finish on my car."

The old carrier laughed. "Okay, sonny," he said, "you can walk in."

He reached back and selected a carton about a foot square, tossing it to Hank, who was surprised at its unexpected heaviness. "Go ahead, it's only a short ways. There's a mailbox in there."

"In there?" Hank looked to see if the old man was kidding. He looked serious, so Hank went down the trail with the carton. About twenty feet from where they had parked, he came to a huge bronze mailbox mounted on a concrete post. A brass plate was attached to the box with letters stating: U.S.GOV. PROPERTY PROJECT-CHP 213.9.

Hank looked at the package. The return address on it was the Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. The lid to the mailbox was hanging open. Hank slid the package in and closed it. Barely legible on the lid was the designation, BOX 29.

Hank tried to see through the thick brush beyond the mailbox. He looked for a building or other structure. There was nothing in view. He turned to leave and was spotted by an outraged blue jay. The bird screamed overhead.

Then, deep in the woods beyond the mailbox, he heard a strange sound, as if an off key trombone were being played in a well.

"Chuckoo chuckoo chuckit

"Chuckoo chuckoo chuckit"

Upon returning to the car, Hank chose to ignore the complacent

smile on the old man's face. "Is there a government station back in there someplace?"

"Nope."

"Who gets the package, then?"

"Don't know."

Hank backed around, throwing gravel. "How long have you been delivering to that box?"

"Thirty years."

"Come on."

"There's been changes in packaging and the box was rebuilt about twenty years ago and that's it."

Through the rest of the route and all the way back to the post office, Hank endeavored to pry information about the box from the old carrier. "Someone must get the package if it's always gone."

"Oh, yes, it's always gone the next day. I used to check on it. It's a fact. The package is always gone, and I've never been able to find out who picks it up."

"Seems to me you haven't made much effort to find out."

"Young fellow," said the old man, "when you work for one government agency, you don't ask questions about what another agency is doing. It's none of your business. Your job is to deliver the mail. Do just that and you'll make out fine. I'll tell you one thing, though, the lid on that box is always open when you make the next delivery. You'd think they'd at least close it."

For a while Hank was too busy getting accustomed to his new employment to be concerned with Box 29; however, when the next package arrived, his interest was revived. The lid was open when he delivered the package, so he closed it firmly to see if it would stay shut, and it did.

The next morning he checked back, found the lid open and the package gone. There were no tire tracks on the trail. Whoever had picked it up had walked in.

On the next delivery date, Hank drove back after completing the route and rushed to the box, but found the package already gone and, as usual, the lid open.

The next month he tried a new method. He withheld delivery of the carton until he had finished the rest of the route, then went to Box 29 and made the delivery by carefully driving into the trail, where he sat until dark. No one approached the box during that time, but the next morning he found the lid open and the package gone.

On occasion, Hank tried to discuss Box 29 with the postmaster, but after several brushoffs and more advice to mind his own business, he gave up.

One Sunday he drove up to the box and picked his way through the brush behind it. After a way the brush thinned out into a forest of white pine, oak, and sassafras. Here there was little green except moss at the base of some trees and green-stem parasite vines getting a foothold on low-hanging limbs. The forest floor was soft to step upon. Last year's dry leaves crunched under his feet. He stopped now and then to listen, hearing nothing. The forest was silent.

About one hundred yards from Box 29 he came to an ancient white oak. The oak was about eighty feet tall and had a large hole in its trunk, high off the ground. The tree wasn't dead, for its upper foliage looked quite green where sunshine filtered through. Looking back from the tree, it seemed to Hank there were signs of a trail leading from the box to the tree, although brush and forest carpet made it impossible to tell. The place was too quiet. It gave him the creeps, so he hurried back to the box. At the box, he slammed the lid into place and instantly, from deep in the woods, he heard the sound again.

"Chuckoo chuckoo chuckit"

"Chuckoo chuckoo chuckit"

That night Hank wrote a letter to the Department of Agriculture. He printed the letter to conceal his handwriting and he signed it CONCERNED TAXPAYER.

Elmer A. Jugman, Supervisory Investigator of the Inter-Agency Investigations Pool (IAIP), a catch-all unit handling federal investigations of a non-criminal nature and other matters beneath the dignity of the Bureau and like agencies, sat in his glass cubicle smugly viewing his domain. Itchy Jugman was probably unaware that his subordinates called him Itchy, for the obvious reason that he often walked about the office scratching himself. He considered himself a self-made man, although he had gained his position by throat-cutting and his wife's political connections. Itchy had much of the cunning of an ignorant man, and he preferred clever duplicity to factual investigation.

He pressed a button, bringing one of his employees forward. The

employee, one Investigator Eddie Sizzle, was a slightly built man with a ferret face. Eddie thrived on paperwork. He could contrive reams of reports without ever dealing with a fact and come to a brilliant conclusion without revealing one. Itchy found him useful.

"How's your caseload, Eddie?"

"Okay."

"I've got a screwy one for you."

"Such as?"

Itchy produced an inter-departmental memo, passing it to Sizzle. It stated briefly, "Request investigation regarding unaccountable shipment of surplus commodity. See Roger Raddish/Agricultural Surplus Section."

"If they can't account for their shipments, how can I be expected to?"

"You will, one way or another," said Itchy.

Roger Raddish was a pipe-smoking dreamer. He liked a smooth sailing, no-boat-rocking operation and would have buried the CONCERNED TAXPAYER letter if it hadn't been kicked around too many sections before coming to him. He, at first, tried to solve the problem of Box 29 by making phone calls, but was only able to determine the contents of the carton and that the mail room and warehouse had standing orders to implement the shipment. The reference numeral CHP 213.9 had apparently been in use prior to the Dewey Decimal System and had escaped revision at its inception. He was unable to locate the records of the early classification changes. Raddish explained all this to Sizzle during an interview. Sizzle had one question.

"What's in the shipment?"

"Peanut butter," said Raddish. "We send five pounds of peanut butter to Box 29 on the twenty-seventh of each month."

"Why the twenty-seventh?"

"Who knows," said Raddish.

Sizzle made notes regarding the interview with Raddish and spent several hours in the Agriculture file room. This was long enough for him to gather sufficient information for a three page interim report, saying nothing of value.

His next report covered a trip to the Federal Records Center, where he rummaged through old records relative to peanut butter. Again another three page report of similar uselessness. Sizzle then requested travel authority for the Box 29 area.

The postmaster was visibly jittery. A federal agent sent from Washington to his small office was unhinging. He ran back and forth, smoking one cigarette after another. He thrust framed postal efficiency reports under Sizzle's face and even broke out the office sick leave records. No doubt Box 29 was merely a decoy for some more ominous purpose. When he saw Hank's vehicle driving in, he rushed out to meet him.

"Did you write to anyone about Box 29?"

"Certainly not," said Hank sweetly.

"You used to ask lots of questions about it."

"So what?"

"I'll tell you what," said the postmaster, lighting another cigarette. "There's a Washington investigator here wanting to know about it."

Hank played it cool, so cool, in fact, that Sizzle remarked in his report that the route carrier was obviously uninterested.

The following morning Sizzle joined Hank on the route, following with his own government car, regardless of the postmaster's warning that folks in the area had been known to shoot anyone driving a car with government plates, as they might be taken for Revenueurs.

Sizzle examined Box 29 and took snapshots of it from all angles. Then, leaving Hank to go on alone, Sizzle drove back to the nearest farm.

Tyson Hopkins was plowing with a large orange-colored tractor. Sizzle parked and walked over to the field. When Tyson got to the end of his furrow, he shut the motor down and waited for Sizzle to come to him. Sizzle held up his I.D. card. Tyson spat tobacco juice. It hit the orange paint on the wheel and ran on down to the ground. Sizzle gagged.

"What can I do for you?"

"What do you know about that government property down the road?"

"You ought to know more about the government than I do."

"There seems to be some confusion."

"That sounds like the government," said Tyson, getting down from the tractor. "Tell you what, I need to get away from this job for a while. You drive me over there, and I'll show you around."

A double-barreled shotgun was leaning against a nearby fence-

post. Tyson picked it up and brought it along to the car.

"What's the gun for?" asked Sizzle as Tyson placed it on the back seat.

"Never know when you'll run into a bear or flush a turkey."

"Bear?" said Sizzle nervously.

"Lots of bear. Turkey, too," said Tyson, spitting tobacco juice out the window. "Talking makes me spit. I can ride that tractor all day without spitting, but the minute I talk, the juice begins to flow."

"No doubt," said Sizzle.

Sizzle drove the car right up to Box 29; he wasn't worried about scratches on a government vehicle. Tyson led the way through the brush to the clearing near the old white oak. Sizzle stayed as close to Tyson as he could, regardless of his short legs and Tyson's long strides. Some of the brush was over his head. There was nothing that would have induced him to enter this jungle by himself.

"See that big oak?"

"Yes."

"Well, somewhere between it and the mailbox is a stone marker, but I've never seen it."

"How do you know about it if you've never seen it?"

"Granddaddy took me hunting here when I was a boy. He said that long before the First World War, some government people came up here, hung around for a few days, and put up a stone. Granddaddy said there was writing on it, but he couldn't read nohow, so he didn't know what it said."

"Might still be there," said Sizzle eagerly.

Tyson took a fresh bite from a plug of tobacco. "I reckon. And you're sure welcome to look, but I tried years ago, dug and prodded around with an iron rod, but never could find it. It's probably down quite a ways by now."

The thought of using a shovel was alien, if not downright repulsive, to Sizzle. He looked around for an alternative, anything to fill in a report. "That's a big hole in that tree. What's in it?"

"You name it. Hoot owls, squirrels . . . bobcats."

"I'd like to look into that hole," said Sizzle with conviction.

"The hell you say!"

"I'll pay for use of a ladder."

"How much will you pay?"

"Twenty bucks, providing you come with me and help with it."

"It's a deal," said Tyson. "I haven't made twenty bucks this week."

At the Hopkins farm, Tyson fetched a ladder from the barn and tied it to the top of Sizzle's car. Back they went to Box 29, Tyson striding along easily with his end of the ladder tucked under one arm, while Sizzle skipped and stumbled, sometimes out of sight in the brush, attached to the other end like a loose appendage.

Once up the ladder, Sizzle took a closeup photograph of the hole, then, slinging the camera over his shoulder, took a small flashlight from his pocket and peered down. The hole was very deep. It curved beyond reach of the inflexible light. For a moment, Sizzle thought he could smell peanut butter, but just then all hell broke loose and he forgot about it for a very good reason.

That afternoon a pair of black bear cubs had found a cache of wild honey in another hollow section of the tree quite a bit higher than the hole Sizzle was investigating. They had been too busy eating to observe the ladder being put up, but when they finally looked down and saw company in the tree, they panicked and bolted for the ground.

The first bear landed on Sizzle's back, ripping his skin and shirt in passing. His brother mistook Sizzle's face for a tree knob, to which he secured his hind foot during the descent. Sizzle screamed and grabbed at the air as the ladder slipped from Tyson's grasp, throwing Sizzle onto the soft carpet of leaves. It was rude, but Tyson couldn't help laughing as the torn and bloodied Sizzle struggled to his feet.

"I'd give back the twenty bucks for a picture of that," he said, slapping his thigh repeatedly.

That evening, in the quiet security of his motel room, his face and back patched by a local doctor, Eddie Sizzle sat at a desk working on his report. He was holding an Ediphone mike in his hand when his eye fell upon a large wall calendar containing around its border birthday illustrations and symbols relating to American presidents. Washington had a cherry tree, Tyler a canoe, but the symbol that caught his attention was a teddy bear next to the picture of Theodore Roosevelt and the date of his birth—October 27, 1858. Sizzle relaxed and spoke into the recorder.

"And in conclusion, in the opinion of the reporting investigator, the purpose of Box 29 is that of a bear sanctuary, probably under the jurisdiction of the Federal Park Service. It is further believed that the sanctuary was inaugurated in honor of President Theodore Roosevelt, as it is noted that the shipments to the box are always

made on the twenty-seventh of each month, and that the president's birthday was also on the twenty-seventh and he had a vast interest in forestry and wild life."

Sizzle ran his hand over his sore face, then continued. "It is further believed the peanut butter is used to supplement protein in the bears' diet, and it is therefore recommended that if further investigation is desired, such investigation should be made through the Federal Park Service."

Back in Washington, Itchy Jugman approved the report and passed it on. Raddish, happy to let sleeping dogs dream of rabbits, filed the report and notified relevant sections to continue shipments as a matter of liaison with the Department of Interior. Raddish was too experienced in government ways to instigate an inquiry with the Federal Park Service.

Back at the post office, quite some time after Eddie Sizzle had departed, Hank was confronted by the postmaster on a day when another carton arrived for Box 29.

"Anything new at Box 29?"

"Nope."

"No kind of work there?"

"Nope. Why do you ask?"

The postmaster picked the carton up and examined it closely before handing it to Hank.

"Just thought something might have come of that investigator's being here. Don't you think so?"

"Couldn't care less," said Hank. He had no intention of telling his boss how he still heard the strange sound when making the delivery, and occasionally heard it when driving by the box. No one would ever know he'd written the letter if he left well enough alone.

Thus, the case was closed and neither the CONCERNED TAXPAYER, the general public, nor the government was ever cognizant of two unrelated and unrecorded occurrences that would have changed its entire aspect.

In the 1908 section of the Agriculture Administration Building, during remodeling, an old file came to light behind a section of wall. It was shoveled into a trash barrel along with lath and plaster, then hauled to a dump. On the way to the dump, wind blew a sheet

of paper from the file over the fence of a mental institution. There, one of the inmates picked it up and read . . .

"As it has been determined that the Cacahuatate bird's importation from South America has failed to eliminate peanut beetles, but has actually created a new menace in that the Cacahuates are now attacking the peanuts in the peanut growing areas of Virginia and are being hunted down by irate farmers . . . and in view of maintaining good relations with South America, it is recommended that a sanctuary be found in the Blue Ridge area, well away from peanut crops . . ." (Here, the bottom of the page, probably containing a signature, had been torn away.)

The inmate giggled, crumpled the paper, and threw it into a trash enclosure.

The second occurrence was witnessed only by local jaybirds and crows in the vicinity of Box 29. On the next twenty-eighth of the month, after hearing the lid close on the mailbox, a very huge and weird bird with a banana-shaped yellow bill, lavender feathers, and extremely formidable talons, the last survivor of a flock once imported to control peanut beetles, landed on top of Box 29. He jumped up and down until the lid came open, pulled out the carton, and flew off with it.

At the edge of a deep ravine that contained countless remnants of cartons and cans in various stages of deterioration, the bird set the carton down and tore it apart with his claws, revealing a large can. Quite easily and deftly, he pried the lid off the can, plunged his long yellow beak up to the hilt in soft peanut butter . . . swallowed it . . . and looked up, calling to the circling jays and curious crows.

"Chuckoo chuckoo chuckit"

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FICTION

The Stainless Steel Cart

by Stephen Wasylyk



Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

Harry deposited the hot dog on the bun, replaced the tongs, turned and handed the dog to the shaggy-haired kid standing to one side of the cart.

As he took the kid's coins, his eyes flicked up from the grimy palm to the little knot of people on the corner waiting to cross the street, in time to see a tall man wearing a blue blazer and a tieless button-down shirt smoothly slip something thin and gleaming into the back of a stocky, half-bald man in front of him.

The bald man's back arched, one hand curling toward the pain, but he made no sound.

Blue Blazer drew the thin object out of the man's back. It glistened wetly for an instant and was gone, up his sleeve it seemed. His head swiveled slowly and nonchalantly, his dead eyes locking with Harry's for a cold instant and leaving ice in his heart.

The bald man brushed several people aside as he slowly collapsed, drawing looks of indignation.

Harry blinked. What he had seen lay on the shocked surface of his mind, unable to penetrate, as Blue Blazer stepped around the crowd and disappeared, leaving the bald man nothing more than a tan shark-skin suit and polished brown

shoes sprawled on the concrete and ringed by people who stared down at him with blank faces.

A middle-aged woman leaned forward over the fallen man, her voice shrill. "Probably a heart attack. Anyone know CPR?"

Harry turned back to his cart, numb except for a crawling sensation in his back, a shrinking of flesh at the spot where he had seen the thin object enter the bald man's coat.

Poison? A drug? It didn't matter. He'd seen a murder. And if the kid hadn't made him turn like that—

Eyes closed, he leaned on the cart with both hands, all feeling gone from his legs, his mind locked on the image like the freeze-frame of a video recorder.

He knows you saw him, Harry. What do you do now?

He glanced over his shoulder. The ring of people had grown, blocking his view, a siren wailing closer.

You've got to tell the police, Harry.

No way. One newspaper story, one reporter on TV saying the police had a witness, and Blue Blazer would know who it was.

The thought of those dead eyes and the smoothness and ruthlessness with which the bald man had been killed left him hollow.

A young guy in a plaid shirt rapped impatiently with a coin. "How about a dog, man?"

"Sure," said Harry. His hand trembled as he reached for the bun.

The young guy indicated the crowd. "What's happening?"

"Heart attack, I think." Harry's hand was still shaking as he held out the dog.

"That's the way it goes," said the young guy. Holding his hot dog with both hands, he edged into the crowd for a closer view.

You lied to him, Harry.

Harry slammed the stainless steel lid down on the steaming hot dogs. Sure. Tell him the bald guy was murdered.

Okay, Harry. What now?

Get the hell out of here and not come back.

Yeah, Harry. A year without a job. Going out on a limb for the loan to build this rig. Cruising around for three more months trying to find a good spot that wasn't already taken. Listening to Paula complain about the loan payment and when are you going to do something useful, Harry? This is the best corner you've found. For the first time, you'll meet the loan payment on your own this month. Maybe get Paula off your back. And where are you going to move? Where can you hide? A hot dog vendor and his cart can't hide, Harry.

If he kept his mouth shut,

maybe Blue Blazer would realize he had nothing to worry about and leave him alone.

Sure, Harry. And maybe the corporation will come back from bankruptcy and they'll make you the president.

He began to pack up, tucking things away with practiced hands. Small as it was, the cart held enough to keep him going all day on a busy day. He'd designed it that way.

He didn't know why he decided to hit the streets as a vendor, and when he discovered how much it cost to get started, he almost gave up.

Instead, he'd dragged out his calculator, a pad, and a pencil, and the cart was the result: light, compact, easy to move, not an inch of room wasted; a gleaming stainless steel box moved along by the bicycle half he'd attached to the front. It would have been easier to sit behind the cart and pedal, but he'd decided that after serving hot dogs all day, he didn't want the odor blowing in his face on the way home.

A truck rumbled past, the cart trembling.

Like Harry inside.

He was standing at the window when Paula stepped out of the car, closed the door, and leaned forward to smile and wave at the driver, a man from

her office named Griggs who picked her up each morning and brought her home at the end of the day.

He didn't like Griggs.

All Paula said was, would you rather I spent money for the bus and subway; Harry, when I'm the only one working in this house?

She came across the lawn; blonde, slim-suited, ruffled blouse still immaculate, walking with an easy stride—a beauty salon, dress shop-manufactured clone of the women in the fashion magazines.

He switched on the television to pick up the early newscast, the anchor's voice droning on about today's crisis. The teleprompter would feed him a new one tomorrow. Harry had discovered that by watching day after day when he was out of work.

He'd realized one afternoon that he was watching a man making two hundred thousand dollars a year trying to sound concerned, which had to be difficult for anyone making two hundred thousand a year and none of it had anything to do with him.

That was the day he'd decided to build the cart.

Paula dropped her purse on the table and reached up to unfasten an earring.

"Well, Harry, how much did we lose today on your little

business venture?"

His voice was thin. "I saw a man murdered."

Hands still at her ear, she studied him.

"You're joking."

"On a corner in broad daylight with a dozen people standing around and I was the only one who saw it."

She removed the earring slowly and reached for the other.

"What did the police say?"

"I didn't tell the police."

She held the earrings in her palm for a moment before spilling them on the table with a little clatter.

"Aren't you the one who always complained about people who didn't want to get involved when they saw—"

He held up a hand and pointed at the TV.

The solemn-voiced anchor was talking about an attorney named Ritter who had collapsed and died on a downtown street corner, the cause believed to be a heart attack. Ritter, the police said, had built his practice by defending underworld characters.

Harry switched off the TV.

"He didn't say the man was murdered, Harry."

"The news people know only what the police tell them and the police probably don't know yet. The man was stabbed in the back with a thin instrument, poisoned or drugged, I

don't know, by a guy who looked like a stockbroker on vacation."

"If you're sure of what you saw, I don't know why you didn't tell the police."

Harry sank into a chair wearily and rubbed his forehead. The headache had taken hold on the way home, and aspirin had done nothing yet.

"Either I'm speaking in Hindustani or you're not listening. I told you I was the *only one who saw it*. Now guess who is next on the killer's list."

"All the more reason to go to the police. They'll protect you."

"How? I sell hot dogs on street corners. I'm out in the open, Paula. That's spelled o-p-e-n and it means there is absolutely nothing between me and anyone who comes up to the cart or decides to fire a bullet from a window. And even if the police could do something about that, how long would they keep it up? First they have to find him, then put him away. With our speedy judicial system, you're talking about a year or more before the trial, during which he's out on bail, and even if they do lock him up I'm not safe. Someone hired him to kill Ritter. They can always hire someone else to kill me."

She placed a cool hand on his head, a mother reassuring a child.

"You're always thinking of

the worst possible scenario, Harry. I'll take a shower and give it some thought. Then we'll have dinner and talk about it."

In the last year, he hadn't made a move without her taking a shower and giving it some thought, except for the hot dog cart and she hadn't allowed him to forget that, but building that cart and pushing it around was the only satisfying thing he'd done since the plant closed.

Now Blue Blazer had to come along.

He leaned back, his head throbbing.

She came down the stairs in a shapeless robe, an enormous pair of furry bedroom slippers on her feet. There had been a time when she would have worn something lacy and frilly and sheer, but she'd only been a secretary then. Evidently office managers didn't wear things that were lacy, frilly, and sheer.

"What would you like for dinner, Harry?"

"I left my appetite on that corner."

She sat down opposite him. "Aren't you overreacting to this situation?"

"Only a little. After all, how difficult can it be to cope with the thought that there is someone out there who will kill me as soon as he can?"

"Not difficult if you use common sense. He doesn't know

who you are, and he can't find you if you don't go back to the corner. I told you before. It isn't necessary for you to drag that ridiculous cart all over the city feeding people uncultured enough to eat on the street. Find a real job."

The headache centered over his eyes.

"You wouldn't understand," he said slowly, "but that cart is how I make my living. I'll be damned if I'll give it up because a dead-eyed aberration of a human being intends to kill me. Furthermore, I don't know why, but I feel that cart will bring me something I've always wanted."

"Like what?"

"Maybe freedom."

"You're right. I don't understand," she said. "But if that's how you want it, then you must go to the police. They'll keep an eye on you, hoping that the man does try to kill you. It's probably the only way they'll catch him."

"You want me to serve as bait?"

"No. I want you to walk away from the whole thing, but if you insist on being stupid, then let it serve some purpose. Let the police protect you. I certainly don't want you killed on a dirty street corner while selling hot dogs. Goodness knows, I'm already embarrassed enough at

the office by being known as the wife of the hot dog man."

She rose. "I'll get dressed. We'll go to the police together."

"I'm capable of doing that by myself."

She paused with one hand on the railing and a foot on the first step. "Of course you are, but as usual you're not thinking. If you walk in alone with a story like that, they'll consider you one of those psychological misfits looking for a little publicity. With me there, they'll take you seriously. We'll place the whole thing in their hands. They'll know exactly what to do. After all, it's their job, isn't it?"

He watched the enormous furry slippers disappear up the stairs, detesting the way they converted feminine feet into elephantine monstrosities. Whoever designed them had to hate women. Still, he should feel privileged. He was the only one permitted to see her wearing them.

Forget the slippers, Harry. She's decided. You're going to the police. You'd better hope you get someone good.

She would never understand that simply because some people had a job, it didn't necessarily follow that they did it well, or even wanted to do it well, and if he ran into a slow learner or someone interested

only in counting the days to his retirement, she'd be a widow by this time tomorrow.

She wouldn't weep. She'd be too preoccupied with making certain the black dress and the accessories were from an accepted designer.

On the way home, she kept one eye on the rear view mirror.

"They're following us, as they said they would, so I suppose they'll be parked in front of the house all night."

He grunted. She'd been right. They hadn't believed him, not until he told them to call the morgue and check Ritter's back for a small puncture wound. After they did, they treated him with a solid respect.

The wound had bled only a little and not through the man's jacket at all, so no one had noticed it. It would have turned up in the autopsy, but that would have been late the next day.

Three hours had gone into answering questions into a tape recorder, flipping through mug books, and working with an artist sliding sheets of plastic into various combinations until they formed an image that looked somewhat like Blue Blazer.

By the time it was over, he felt plucked and squeezed dry. Deep inside, he'd been hoping

they would come up with a scheme that would get him off that corner, but when they heard he intended to be there the next day, they were all for it.

"You won't see blue uniforms standing around polishing their badges, but we'll be there," said one. "If the guy shows up, we'll take him."

Sure they would. But why did he still feel as though he would never again be warm?

Paula turned into the driveway. "I'm going straight to bed. They want us to go about our business as usual tomorrow, but I won't get much done thinking about you down on that corner."

"That's the nicest thing you've said to me in months," he said dryly.

"People create their own problems, Harry. I've told you that many times. I suppose you intend to stay up and worry?"

"I have a little work to do on the cart."

"You and that cart. That's exactly what I mean. If you'd never built it, we wouldn't have this problem."

"Maybe we'd always have a problem," he muttered.

"You've taken to mumbling lately, Harry. It isn't a good sign."

"Thank you for the lovely evening," he said. "Maybe we can get together again soon."

He arrived at the corner about ten thirty to give himself time to set up the cart and get the frankfurters hot so that he would be ready for the early lunch crowd. There was no question about it. Just being there on the corner intensified that coldness inside him.

If the police were there, he couldn't pick them out, except for a street person sitting with his back against the building about ten yards away, but then he was dirty enough to be for real.

He didn't know where they were, but he had no doubt they would grab Blue Blazer if he showed up. He also had no doubt it would be too late to do him any good. The way Blue Blazer operated, the man would be ten feet away before anyone realized he was dead.

A small man in a striped business suit slowed as he passed, stopped, and came back.

Harry felt his stomach muscles tense. Short, thin, with a touch of gray at his temples, the man wasn't the type to eat hot dogs on street corners at eleven in the morning.

Be careful, Harry.

The man smiled. "Talk to you for a minute?"

"Depends on what you want to talk about."

"Where did you get this cart?"

"I built it because I couldn't afford to buy one."

"Design it yourself?"

"Right down to the rubber tires."

The man walked around the cart slowly, Harry turning to face him. No one else around seemed to be interested.

I told you, Harry. You're on your own.

"Why the questions?" He shifted his weight from one foot to the other uneasily.

"I own a company that makes these things. Mind showing me how you set up the system inside?"

"I mind."

The man smiled. "Don't blame you. Why is someone like you selling hot dogs?"

"You sound like my wife."

The man chuckled. "What do you tell her?"

"That I'm tired of looking for a job."

The man reached for a vest pocket. Harry stepped back.

"What are you so nervous about?"

"You're not reaching for money."

"I might be." The man handed him a business card. "If you want a job, come see me. You may have built this yourself, but it's a damned good job and probably can be a production model with a few minor modifications. Are you an engi-

neer, by any chance?"

"A good one until the corporation folded."

"Listen—" the man's eyebrows rose. "What's your name?"

"Harry."

"Listen, Harry. I've been thinking about adding a cart this size to our line because I think there's a big market for them. As you said, you couldn't afford to buy what was available. This would probably sell for half our lowest price model. Are you interested?"

It could be a trick, Harry.

"I'll think about it."

"Don't think about it too long. Now that I've seen yours, I might go ahead with one of my own."

Harry glanced at the card. "The first one I see that looks like this, you get sued, Mr. Powell."

Powell laughed and held out his hand. "I like your style, Harry. Just call ahead to be sure I'll be in."

He relaxed as Powell walked away. The company name on the card was familiar, so Powell was probably who he said he was. Damn. He always knew this cart would do something good for him.

Smugly satisfied with Powell's offer and busy with a sudden long line of early lunchgoers, he forgot the coldness inside, forgot to keep an eye on

who came up to the cart, seeing only hands and coins until there was a pause long enough for him to load the steamer hastily.

He caught a dark pinstriped suit out of the corner of his eye and half turned with a smile—and saw the mistake he couldn't afford to make already pushing him into his grave.

Because Pinstripe's hands were in motion, the left raised and extended as though to point out something he wanted, in reality masking the other as it drew a small revolver fitted with a silencer from under the coat.

Hit it, Harry!

He ducked to one side and desperately jabbed a toe at a small pedal on the side of the cart just as the gun leveled and coughed.

A powerful jet of steam from a small pipe protruding from the top of the cart screeched into Pinstripe's face as a shop window across the street crashed and Pinstripe screamed in agony, the sounds blending as Harry frantically heaved at the cart, toppling it over onto Pinstripe, basting him with hot water and garnishing him with steaming hot dogs, buns, relish, catsup, mustard, and sauerkraut, and for the first time, he saw that Pinstripe was really Blue Blazer, the wig from yesterday gone, his hair short, his

shirt white and starched—the only thing the same those dead eyes.

Two men were suddenly at his side.

"You all right, Harry?"

He let out a long, slow breath to stabilize his churning stomach. He had known that Blue Blazer would move too fast for anyone to help him, and if he hadn't stayed up half the night rigging that steam jet—

What the hell.

If he hadn't learned anything else while out of work, he had learned that he couldn't expect anyone else to take care of him. He had to take care of himself.

He managed to pedal the cart home even though one of the wheels was bent and it waddled along behind like a person wearing one shoe.

There hadn't been much for him to do after they scraped Blue Blazer off the sidewalk, and the police wouldn't need him again until the gunman was out of the hospital.

He debated calling Paula, but he'd told her that morning that she'd hear from him or the police if anything happened, and if she heard nothing, she could assume no news was good news.

He drove the cart to the rear of the garage to his workbench

and lowered the door. With the door open, the neighbors had a habit of coming up the driveway and making conversation. He wanted no conversation right then.

The cart didn't take long to restore to working order except for the bent wheel, which would have to be replaced. He fired up the big propane tank to check out the system. The steam rose satisfactorily with no leaks apparent, not even in the pressure tank he'd installed last night to create the steam jet that had saved him from Blue Blazer.

He still felt uneasy, even though it was all over. Maybe it was the tank. It had kept him on edge all morning. The components had been in the garage, left over from his experiments with the system before he'd built the cart, but he'd had no pressure relief valve to make it safe and couldn't pick one up at midnight. He had to make do with a pressure gauge and a manual valve to bleed off the pressure when it climbed too high.

He didn't like to jury-rig it that way. The tank wasn't very big, but the live steam could cause a great deal of damage if the tank burst, particularly to him if he was standing next to it.

Install a relief valve or get rid of it, Harry.

He didn't intend to get rid of it. The setup would come in handy if someone waved a gun in his face again, which could happen to anyone standing on any corner at any time.

He placed both hands on top of the cart. The warmth felt good but couldn't seem to penetrate inside to thaw the ice block in his stomach.

The side door of the garage creaked open as Griggs stepped through and walked toward him.

He was about Harry's age, a blond, square-jawed man given to wearing narrow-labeled silk suits with side-vented coats, silk ties, and thin-soled Italian shoes.

"You're early. Paula with you?"

"She'll be along later, Harry. Someone else is bringing her home."

"I suppose there's a reason for you to be here?"

"She told me about your problem, but we were sure you'd make it through the day. People like you always manage to survive."

"We were sure?"

"You should know, Harry, that Paula and I have a thing going between us. You're not serious or career-oriented enough for a woman like her. We'd be good for each other. We have compatible personalities and a mutually satisfying re-

lationship that will take us far."

"Are you telling me you've been having an affair with my wife?"

"Not just an affair, Harry. It's a deep, soul-binding relationship."

"And now that her soul is bound, she wants to do the same with her certificates of deposit by divorcing me and marrying a wimp like you."

Griggs smiled. "You can't insult me. I'm already far more successful and settled than you have ever been, and with Paula at my side, I'll be even more successful."

Harry shrugged. "I wish you both many happy years of joint tax returns and combined IRA's. But be careful of those furry slippers. They've been known to breed."

"Frankly, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm convinced Paula is right. You're not very far from a complete breakdown."

"But still sensible enough to know when two people deserve each other. She can have the divorce."

"No divorce, Harry. If that was all she wanted, Paula would have told you herself. Divorces are messy. Property settlements and lawyers' fees can really deplete one's assets, and who knows what trouble some-

one like you might cause in the future?"

Griggs pulled a small automatic from his pocket. "That's why this wimp is going to kill you, Harry. We can't let this opportunity pass. When you're found dead, the police will think your murderer caught up with you. But don't feel bad. We'll give you a nice funeral. You know how fussy Paula is about details."

He felt no anger. Maybe this was why that chill inside had stayed with him. Something buried deep had sensed that it didn't all revolve around Blue Blazer; that once unleashed, violence had a way of drawing people into its vortex.

"I really shouldn't tell you this, but I see no reason to die laughing," he said slowly. "Your plan won't work because we caught the guy today. Kill me, and the closest you and Paula will get during the next twenty years is writing letters to each other, and I don't give a damn how compatible you are, that will hardly be a mutually satisfying relationship."

"Good try, Harry, but if they had really caught him, you would have called Paula and it also would have been on the radio. Neither of those things happened."

The steam jet, Harry. Get him to move.

"Listen," he said, "I—"

Griggs shook his head. "Sorry, Harry, but as they say, you only go around once and you've reached the end."

The flame stabbed at him and spun him off his feet, the report loud inside the garage.

He lay still, eyes closed, his face pressed against the concrete floor, his side numb.

Griggs's footsteps came close. *Play dead, Harry.*

He stopped breathing.

A toe nudged him and then the footsteps retreated to the door and were gone. The steam from the cart hissed softly.

Damn. Griggs had never come close enough or moved into position for him to trigger off that steam jet, even as a diversion.

Damn. He never thought the wimp would shoot. He should have known you can never tell what a wimp will do.

Damn. The neighbors wouldn't pay any attention to the gunshot. Paula would have realized that. Crazy Harry fooling around in his garage again.

They wouldn't get away with it, not when the police already had Blue Blazer.

Fat lot of good that will do you if you're dead, Harry. Get moving.

He pulled his knees up beneath him slowly and pushed his chest off the floor. The numbness in his side was eb-

bing slowly, retreating before the pain.

He could feel the warm wetness as it plastered his shirt against his skin, but the coldness was still with him. Now he knew what it was and what it meant and if he didn't get out of this garage, it would spread until it took over his entire body and he would never be warm again. Ever.

Whatever the bullet had hit inside him, it had affected his left leg. He'd have a hard time crawling. He looked at the door. Six steps from him, it now appeared to be a mile away.

Use the cart, dummy.

He locked out the pain and concentrated on moving his hands and knees. One. Two. Three. Four.

He made it to the cart and dragged himself erect, holding the handlebars of the bicycle front. Even with the bent wheel, the cart would roll easily. All he had to do was use it for support until he reached the door.

He draped himself over the handlebars and pushed. The cart rolled a few feet.

You're lucky he's a bad shot, Harry.

Paula came running through the door as though she couldn't wait to see what was inside. She stopped when she saw him, eyes wide and then narrow with fury as she spat out an obscenity,

one of the few times she'd ever lost that much control.

Damn. She'd broken his concentration. He could feel himself slipping from the handlebars, but he had to say it.

"You're . . . beautiful . . . when . . . you're . . . angry."

He lost his grip and slid to the floor.

"Why are you alive, Harry?"

Why are you building that cart, Harry? When are you going to find a job, Harry? Why are you selling hot dogs, Harry?

"Your . . . wimp . . . needs shooting . . . practice."

Her voice snapped. "If he had turned on his car radio, he wouldn't have shot at all. The story came on a half hour after he left. But since he did it, the least he could have done was do it right. I've traded one damned fool for another."

All he could see was her blue pumps. They moved closer.

She sounded as though she was talking to herself. "I have no choice now, Harry. I can't let you live to tell them what happened. I'll bluff it through, convince them that it had something to do with what you saw. You have to die, Harry."

"I'll take . . . a shower . . . and give . . . it . . . some thought."

She fell to her knees beside him, her fists clenched, her voice tight. "Don't mock me,

Harry! Just die!"

The cart gleamed beside her.

He wasn't going to die. He wasn't going to let two amateurs kill him after a pro like Blue Blazer had failed. He wasn't going to take Powell's offer, either. He was going to live and get a loan and go into business building the carts himself. He was going to be the Hot Dog King of America.

Not if you lie there and bleed to death, Harry.

He reached for the wheel and tried to pull himself to his feet.

Her voice was contemptuous. "Don't bother, Harry. I intend to keep you here until you're dead and tell them I found you that way."

Three feet from her, pressure building since Griggs had shot him, the tank he'd installed in the cart finally burst with a hollow roar, spewing a massive, shrieking plume of live steam through the torn metal and enveloping her; over in an instant and leaving her writhing on the floor and screaming, and he

knew the screaming in her life had only begun. Never again would she be concerned with whether the way she spoke, the way she walked, or the clothes she wore fitted the image of what she thought she should be.

He almost felt sorry for her.

People create their own problems, Harry.

All that was important now was that no one within hearing distance could ignore those screams, and for the first time the coldness inside was ebbing. It would never leave him completely. No one lived without the fear of death.

He lay looking at the cart affectionately, like a proud father admiring a child who had exceeded his greatest expectations, wondering which of the neighbors would come through the door first.

Hot Dog King of America for sure, Harry.

Damn. It was good to feel warm again.

Scream louder, Paula!

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FICTION

Killing Herbert Pipkin

by G. S. Hargrave

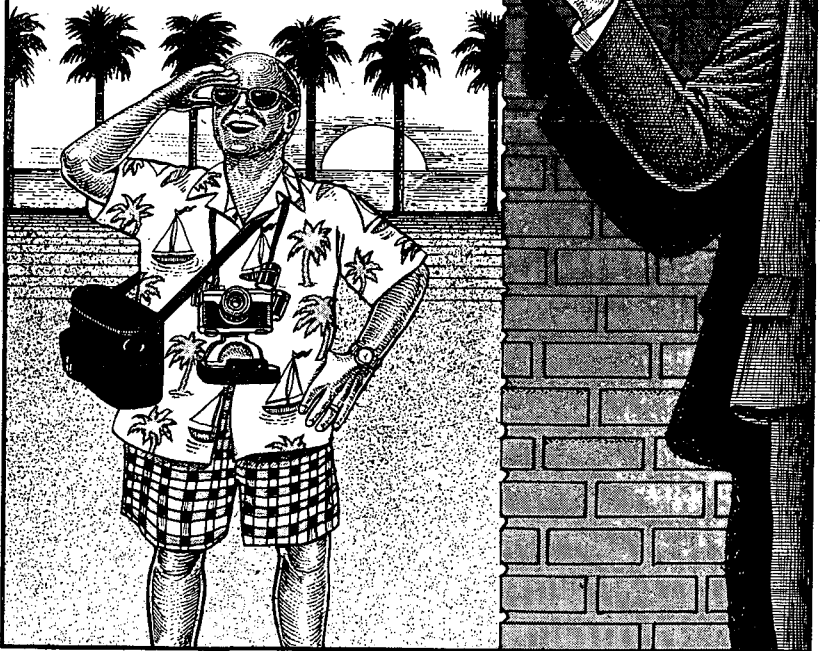


Illustration by Peter D. Fasolino

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It's all over, Sidney Markham thought to himself. The career, the condo, the women, the Mercedes—the whole damn thing—shot to hell and gone in a single, monumental screw-up. Jesus!

Worse yet, his employer, Thaddeus P. Boswell, was watching him with a look he might give to a bug he was about to impale on a pin.

Markham fought a wave of panic. An urge to bolt for the door. Or maybe the window . . .

The window looked out from Boswell's plush office to a cold winter sky, falling snow, and a drop to Washington Street fourteen floors below.

Sidney Markham had every reason to be afraid of the old man. During his rise to the top at Midland Concrete Construction, Incorporated, Boswell had exhibited the unerring instinct of a ferret for where the jugular of each of his enemies could be found. He defined "enemy" as anyone who happened to get in his way. Sidney Markham had just blundered into that unfortunate position.

At sixty-nine, Boswell had both wealth and power. He had gotten them by providing crooked building contractors with substandard work at bargain-basement prices, diverting to his own pockets the difference between actual costs

and the inflated amounts reported to the stockholders. He kept out of jail by means of regular, well-placed bribes, and through the simple expedient of keeping two sets of books.

Books that were the responsibility of his personal secretary, junior partner-in-crime, and current candidate for crucifixion—Sidney Markham.

Markham's predicament had come about like this:

Much of Midland's business was won by underbidding all competitors on a variety of highly profitable public works projects. Since the taxpayers were footing the bill, the law required that the company books be audited upon completion of each job. Such audits were to be done by an independent third party, with the results submitted to an appointed board of review.

Sidney Markham had recently engaged a local CPA—one Herbert T. Pipkin—to perform just such an audit. He had chosen Pipkin's name at random from the listings in the yellow pages. The whole thing had seemed perfectly routine.

Routine, that is, until this morning, when he had discovered to his horror that he had given Herbert T. Pipkin the *wrong set of books*.

"Well?" Boswell's eyes were

hidden behind the reflection of the window in the lenses of his glasses, giving his gaunt, closely-cropped head an unsettling skull-like appearance.

"I—I'm not sure just *how* it happened, Mr. Boswell. Both sets were in the safe. They *do* look almost identical. I'm afraid I must have switched them at some point."

"I see. It was nothing more than a simple oversight." A vein was pulsating in the old man's temple, moving like a bluish worm beneath the paper-thin skin. His face slowly turned deep red. "Is *that* your explanation? Is that the *best* you can do, you *miserable little son-of-a . . .*" His words were abruptly cut off in a fit of sputtering, choking rage.

Markham blinked, as if struck. His face, unlike that of his employer, had gone deathly pale.

Recovering from near-apoplexy, Boswell swiveled his chair to face the white emptiness beyond his office window. His coughing gradually subsided, and he regained some measure of self-control. "Where—are the books—now?"

"Pipkin still has them. He's—He's supposed to return them next week."

"And you expect he will? Once he realizes what he has?"

Markham tried to swallow,

but his mouth was dry as sand.

"Need I remind you about a certain investigation, Sidney? Something to do with the collapse of the Glenbrook low-income housing project, if my memory serves correctly. Perhaps it has slipped your mind that Midland Concrete poured the foundations for the building in question? Or that our private books—now in the hands of Herbert Pipkin—contain records of a number of somewhat irregular cash payments, made to a certain building inspector whose name, I might add, has come up in the newspapers lately?" Boswell turned from the window. "Have you forgotten all about that, Sidney? *Have you?*"

Sidney Markham managed a feeble shake of his head. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a monogrammed handkerchief.

"Good, Sidney! Very good! I'm delighted to see that you're keeping on top of things." Boswell put his fingers together, elbows on his desk. "So tell me: How much is it going to take to keep him quiet?"

Markham's eyes wandered down toward his feet. "We may have a little bit of a problem in that area, Mr. Boswell."

"What the *hell* do you mean, 'we may have a little problem in that area?'"

"With Pipkin. I—ah—don't think he's the sort we can buy off, Mr. Boswell. He's—He's what you might call *honest*."

Boswell stared at Sidney Markham for a second with an expression of blank disbelief, then a short, derisive sound erupted from his throat. "Come off it, Markham! *Everyone* has his price! It's only a question of how much."

Markham shook his head. "Believe me, I know the type. We're going to have trouble."

Boswell leaned heavily back in his chair. "He can't be bought?"

Markham emphatically shook his head.

"Why did you hire someone like *that*?"

"I—I thought he would lend the company a certain air of respectability."

The old man raised his eyebrows, then slowly shook his head. The whole concept of honesty puzzled him. All he had ever been able to conclude was that it must be some form of neurosis, forcing those it afflicted to impose an irrational, self-defeating set of values upon themselves. And Markham was right: Those who had it could be very troublesome. They were virtually impossible to deal with. In Pipkin's case, that could prove disastrous.

There was only one positively

effective solution to such a problem.

"Have him killed."

"*What?*" Sidney Markham's lower jaw dropped.

"It's the only thing to do. I'll give you a phone number. And you're to pay no more than ten thousand for the job. Understand?"

"You want *me* to arrange to have a man *killed*?"

"You're fortunate to be getting a chance to straighten things out."

"*I can't!*"

The old man wrote down the number on a slip of paper and extended it toward Sidney Markham. "Of course you can, Sidney! Unless you'd prefer to spend the next five-to-ten in a prison cell. That's exactly what's going to happen, you know, if Pipkin turns those books over to the federal investigators." Boswell smiled. "You wouldn't like being in prison, Sidney. They wouldn't let you wear those nice three-piece suits you're so fond of."

Markham took the paper in a trembling hand. He glanced from it to Boswell, who was watching his face with an expression of considerable interest. Biting his lip, he folded the paper in half and tucked it into his vest pocket.

"Good boy, Sidney! There may be hope for you yet!"

“Herbert, you should take the plane. Miami is too far to drive alone!”

Herbert Pipkin studied his reflection critically in the mirror on the door of his bedroom closet. His short, rotund body was clad in a Hawaiian shirt—an eye-catching study of sailboats and palm trees in brilliant reds and greens—and baggy Bermuda shorts. The pudgy legs protruding below were knock-kneed and pale, ending in black stretch-socks and Florsheim wingtips.

“It’s not all *that* far, Mother. Besides, you know I get airsick when I fly.”

“So take Dramamine. Your dear father—God rest him—would always take Dramamine when he traveled. Before that, he would always get sick. He even got sick on the train, on the night of our wedding. Imagine!”

The shoes were the problem, Herbert decided. Something a little sportier was what he needed. Deck shoes, maybe. And a hat. Without a hat, one day in the Florida sun and his balding dome would match the red in his shirt.

He opened the closet door and went down on his hands and knees, rummaging through the heaps of shoes that littered the floor. “I’ve already decided to

drive. Besides, I want to have the car when I get there.”

“You could rent a car.”

He kicked off the wingtips, and pulled on a pair of mil-dewed white sneakers. “Phew!” He stood up, and again examined himself in the mirror. There! That was *much* better. “Renting a car for a week would be too expensive. And so would plane tickets.”

The truth, of course, was quite different. For the last nine years, Herbert Pipkin had been flying to Miami each winter for a week in the sunshine, far from the freezing drizzle and slush of Indianapolis. For each of those nine years, he’d had his mother for a traveling companion. Not that he didn’t enjoy his mother’s company. It was just that—well, there were certain *limitations* imposed upon a forty-seven-year-old bachelor who traveled exclusively in the company of a rather domineering sixty-nine-year-old lady. But this year, he had resolved, things were going to be different. And the only way to assure that would be to drive. Mother would never consent to sit in a car all the way to Miami.

“Well!” Mother folded her arms, and drew her mouth into a line of unwavering determination. “Don’t think for a moment that I’m going to change my mind, Herbert T. Pipkin. If

you're going to insist on driving all the way to Florida in that ridiculous little car of yours, you can just go without me! And don't blame me if you get lonely, and have a perfectly miserable time!" With that, she spun on her heel and stalked out of Herbert's bedroom.

She spun and stalked most impressively, for a woman of her years.

Herbert let out a long sigh of relief. In a battle of wits with Mother, one could never be certain of the outcome.

All that left to worry about was the Midland Concrete audit. Of course, it really didn't have to be finished until next week. It was just that he disliked leaving a task undone until the very last minute. It wasn't—tidy.

He picked up the company books, as yet unopened, pondering whether or not he should take them along. There *might* be the odd moment when he could get a little work done—say, in his motel room on the way down. Then again, he was going on vacation. Sidney Markham certainly hadn't given him the impression that there was any real hurry. Maybe he would call Markham from Miami, just to make sure they didn't need them back sooner.

He hesitated, undecided, then dropped the books back on top

of his dresser. He could decide tomorrow morning, before he left.

Imagine, he thought. An entire week in Miami. Without Mother!

He returned to his packing, showing considerable enthusiasm.

On the afternoon of the following day, Sidney Markham entered the private office of Thaddeus P. Boswell. He closed the door softly behind him. A moment later, the girl in the outer office looked up from her typing, startled by the muffled shout that was audible even through the soundproofed door.

"He *what*?" Thaddeus P. Boswell's face had gone the same remarkable shade of crimson that it had on the preceding day.

"He skipped town. Early this morning. He's apparently on his way to Miami."

Sidney Markham speculated on the possibility that his employer might be on the verge of having a massive cerebral hemorrhage. As an unkind fate would have it, he was not.

"Miami? How the hell do you know that?"

"Mr. Brown—the man I hired to take care of things—called about ten minutes ago. He said he was waiting outside Pipkin's

house this morning. He saw Pipkin put a suitcase in his car. He said he seemed to be in a big hurry. He saw something else, too."

"The books?"

Markham nodded. "After Pipkin left, he knocked at the door and talked to some old lady, who turned out to be Pipkin's mother. She told him he was on his way to Miami. Driving all the way."

Boswell slammed his fist down on the desk, then winced at the resultant pain. "Damn! He knows what he has. He's meeting someone in Miami!"

"He won't get that far," Markham said. "Mr. Brown assures me of that."

"He damn well better not!" Boswell's anger gave way to worry. He glared up at Sidney Markham. "You may have underestimated Pipkin. If he's driving, he must realize somebody is after him, and that the airports won't be safe. Where did Brown call from?"

"From a service station on I-75, south of Cincinnati. He told me that he caught up with Pipkin a hundred miles south of Indianapolis. He's been close on his tail ever since."

Boswell mulled over what Markham had told him. "Maybe it's better like this. If some misfortune overtakes Pipkin on the road, it's less likely that anyone

would make a connection with us." He fixed Sidney Markham with a piercing stare. "I trust you *did* make it clear to Brown that Pipkin's death must appear accidental?"

"Oh! Absolutely, Mr. Boswell. And Mr. Brown assures me that Pipkin will be dead by nightfall." Markham chewed at his thumbnail, quite unaware of this new nervous habit. "There is one thing that worries me, though. How much do you think he might have told the federal people already? I mean, he must have told them *something*, or they wouldn't be going to all the trouble of arranging to meet him down in Florida."

"If he'd told them anything important, they'd already have him in protective custody." Boswell studied Markham gnawing at his thumb, wondering about the man's emotional stability. The last thing he needed was for Markham to crack and start thinking about saving his own neck by turning state's evidence. Of course there was still that telephone number. "I wouldn't worry about it. Likely as not, one of their agents was just looking for an excuse to fly down to Miami and put the whole thing on his expense account. That's all."

"You really think so?"

"Sure! Remember, without Pipkin, and without the books,

they can't begin to make a case. Once he's out of the way, you'll be perfectly safe."

Sidney Markham nodded. "Of course. Perfectly safe."

On an interstate somewhere in the middle of Georgia, it was beginning to get dark. A cold, heavy drop of rain hit the windshield with a splat, and then another. The man who called himself Brown fumbled with the knobs on the dash of the unfamiliar car, searching for the one that controlled the wipers, and directed a heartfelt stream of profanity toward the unsuspecting little man in the white Honda Civic station wagon two cars ahead.

Things were not going at all well for Mr. Brown. The day had started out badly, and grown progressively worse.

Hell! He hadn't even intended to leave Indianapolis, and here he was, in the second stolen car of the day, with some unknown person's luggage in the back seat, halfway to Miami.

Oh, sure! It *had* been a rush job and all, with no time for his usual careful planning. Still, he had worked on short notice before, and always with unfailing success. He liked to think of himself as a very creative person.

The plan this morning had

seemed simple enough, and should have gone like clock-work.

Yesterday evening, he had been waiting outside Pipkin's office. He had identified the man and his car, and followed him home to observe where he had parked it. Later that night, he had broken into Pipkin's office. The books Markham wanted were not there. Pipkin had evidently taken them with him.

This morning had found Brown in a hot-wired Buick, parked down the street from Pipkin's house, waiting with motor running for the little man to emerge from his front door. Pipkin would start across the street toward his wagon, and *wham!* In the confusion that followed, Brown would have circled the block, abandoned the Buick, blended into the gathering crowd, and made off with the account books. The police would have called it a hit-and-run, never suspecting anything more.

Unfortunately, it hadn't worked out according to plan.

Pipkin had appeared early, suitcase in hand, arguing all the way to his car with some old lady in a pink housecoat. Brown hadn't counted on there being a witness, nor had he liked his chances of taking them both out in a single pass. He had hesi-

tated. Pipkin, meanwhile, had returned to his house. He reappeared a moment later, carrying the books that Sidney Markham had described.

Seeing his chance rapidly slipping away, Brown had stomped the accelerator to the floor. The Buick's rear tires whined uselessly on the ice along the curb.

Pipkin was gone. On his way to Miami, Brown had soon discovered.

Brown had overtaken Pipkin two hours later. He had taken advantage of an afternoon stop near Cincinnati to phone a report concerning the events of the morning to Markham. That had been a mistake. Markham was unhappy, to say the least. When he had mentioned seeing the books, the man became hysterical.

His second attempt on the life of Herbert Pipkin had certainly been more spectacular than the first, if no less a failure. Thinking back, Brown ground his teeth in frustration and dug his nails into the steering wheel cover.

Pipkin had pulled into a self-service station south of Knoxville, set the pump to running, and scurried off in the direction of the men's room. Brown had made a snap decision: Pipkin dead and the account books destroyed would likely be just as

acceptable to Markham as Pipkin dead and the account books returned.

He had stopped his car on the opposite side of the pumps from Pipkin's wagon. Glancing to see that no one observed, he turned the premium pump on and slid the nozzle beneath the edge of Pipkin's car. He had then retreated to a safe distance, reaching into the pocket of his overcoat for his cigarette lighter.

Pipkin was inside, paying for his gas. A moment later he had returned to his car. He put his nozzle back into the pump, oblivious to the fact that he stood in the midst of a growing puddle of high octane gasoline. Meanwhile, Brown had flicked his lighter in frustration. It refused to spark.

Just as Pipkin started his engine, it had finally flared to life. Brown had backhanded it, sending it skipping across the pavement toward the wash of flammable liquid. It had stopped inches short, sputtering fitfully.

Pipkin pulled out onto the highway. There was a tremendous *whoosh!*, and the entire parking area was engulfed in flames. The heat of the blast had singed Brown's eyebrows. Pipkin had vanished down the road, not even looking back, while everyone else in the vicinity had fled for their lives,

Brown bringing up the rear in his smoldering coat. Where his stolen car had been before, there was only an orange inferno, topped by rolling clouds of oily black smoke.

It had taken the better part of an hour to steal another car, switch plates, and head off in high-speed pursuit. He had finally caught up with Pipkin a hundred miles down the road, dawdling along in his white station wagon as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Lightning flashed. The rain now descended from a black sky in wind-driven sheets. Brown groped over the seat for his cigarettes, annoyed to find the pack empty. The carton he had bought in Indianapolis had gone up with the Buick. He was getting very tired. Surely Pipkin would stop for the night soon.

Hours later, forty miles south of Macon, Georgia, Pipkin yawned, and started watching for a likely motel. Lightning still flickered occasionally, low on the southern horizon, but the rain had stopped an hour ago and he had rolled down the window to let in the fresh night air. Now and then he caught the scent of pine.

He had the AM radio tuned to some late-night talk show. The signal was weak and occasionally faded. The topic un-

der discussion was abduction by flying saucers. A surprising number of callers had some very interesting stories to tell.

Herbert was thinking how dull his own life was. It seemed that nothing unusual ever happened to *him*.

Far up the deserted highway, a red and green glow slowly materialized over the mist-shrouded treetops, giving him a momentary start. It resolved itself into a sign: "E-Z-REST. Free TV in Every Room. VACANCY." Herbert sighed.

He pulled into the drive, crunching across the gravel; and rolled to a stop in front of the office. He failed to notice the car that turned in behind him.

The young man at the front desk was intent on a car chase taking place on the portable television in front of him. There were multiple sirens wailing and lots of tires squealing.

"Excuse me?" Herbert said. "I'd like a room."

"Single or double?"

"Single."

Behind Herbert, the door opened a second time. A man in a dark overcoat came inside.

"I'll need to see your driver's license." The clerk's eyes drifted back to the TV screen. "The room is twenty-five bucks, plus tax. Payable in advance."

Herbert took his license and

some bills from his wallet. "Do you have a restaurant?"

The clerk was filling out the register. He pushed it toward Herbert to sign, then counted out his change. "It closed at eight. There's a sandwich machine, though." He nodded toward a doorway, through which could be seen a number of vending machines. Beyond, the chrome legs of stacked chairs gleamed faintly in a darkened dining room.

"What about a telephone?" Herbert had promised to call his mother.

"Local call?"

"Indianapolis."

"You'll have to use the pay phone. It's 'round the corner from the sandwich machine." He placed a key on the desktop, his eyes on the television. "Room 12. Out the front door, and to your right. Check-out time's nine A.M."

"I'll need change for the phone."

"There's a change machine."

Herbert fed the machine a five dollar bill, and it obligingly relinquished a handful of quarters. He bought a cellophane-wrapped roast beef sandwich, a plastic cup of something that passed for coleslaw, and a barely cool half pint of chocolate milk. That left him with enough for a collect call to his mother in Indianapolis, who still insisted

that he should have taken the plane.

He went out and moved his car to the space in front of his room, then got out to open the door. To his annoyance, the key refused to work. Glancing at the plastic disk on the key ring, he noted that he had been given the key to Room 13. He went down another door and let himself in.

The room was like every other motel room he had ever been in. Empty drawers, save for the inevitable Gideon Bible, empty closet, save for a half dozen wire hangers, a tiled bath with a screened window over the tub, and a bolted-down television, complete with a broken rabbit ears.

He went back out to his car, returning after a moment with his suitcase.

The room he had thought to be his own was apparently occupied. The sound of the television came right through the wall. Someone was watching the same program the desk clerk had been so engrossed in.

Herbert was surprised - how tired a long day on the road had left him. He made quick work of his meager dinner, brushed his teeth, and went straight to bed. He wanted to get an early start in the morning.

On the following morning,

Brown woke early. It was just getting light out.

He got dressed, then stealthfully exited from his own room by way of the bathroom window. Creeping along behind the motel, he took up a position outside the room occupied by Pipkin. He paused for a moment to listen, then—very quietly—he raised the screen of the window directly over the tub.

It was a good plan, he told himself, and a highly original one. It was a plan he could be proud of.

In the car he had stolen on the previous day, he had found a number of highly interesting items. There had been a suit and an assortment of silk shirts, all of which fit him surprisingly well. There had been a very good electric razor. Also a bottle of sleeping pills. Most important of all, there had been a portable radio, which he was now carrying.

In the wall over the bathtub in his own room, there was an idiotically-placed electrical outlet. The same, of course, would be true of all the rooms.

He reached inside Pipkin's window and plugged in the radio, placing it on the tiled ledge hidden behind the curtains, then slid the screen back into position. With a ballpoint pen, he poked a tiny hole through the aluminum mesh. He then un-

bent a wire coathanger, and sat down to wait.

Fifteen minutes later, he heard someone enter the bathroom. The toilet flushed. The bath was filled. Someone coughed, then there came the sound of splashing water.

Brown inserted the end of the coathanger through the hole he had made in the screen, and gave the radio a gentle nudge.

There was a moment of frantic splashing, then silence. Somewhere a circuit breaker tripped; the lights went out.

Brown smiled triumphantly.

All that remained was to retrieve the account books, and he had that all worked out.

He made his way around to the front of the motel, and went into the office. Adopting an expression of suitable concern, he informed the desk clerk that he had been passing one of the doors when he had heard a scream. Perhaps he ought to investigate?

He accompanied the clerk back to Pipkin's room. The clerk knocked lightly, then pounded. There was, of course, no answer. The clerk ran back for his passkey, returning in a flash. In a moment, he would be going to call for an ambulance. That's when Brown would grab the account books.

Just as the clerk inserted the key into the lock, the door of

Room 13 opened. The presumed-to-be-late Herbert Pipkin stepped out, looking quite fit.

Brown started violently. He had just electrocuted the wrong person.

Or nearly so. Fortunately, sometime during the course of his endless hours in front of the television, the desk clerk had picked up the technique of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. Some twenty minutes later, a very unsteady-looking Mr. Bertram Goin—traveling novelty-item salesman from Des Moines, Iowa—was being loaded into the back of a waiting ambulance. And Herbert Pipkin was coming out of the restaurant, getting into his car, and driving away.

For a frightening moment, Brown thought he was going to scream.

Boswell popped two of the blue-and-black capsules into his mouth, and washed them down with a gulp of water. "Where did he call from this time?"

"Valdosta, Georgia. That's almost on the Florida state line." Sidney Markham looked as if he hadn't slept last night. His suit, on the other hand, looked as if he *had* slept—in it. He needed a shave and looked a bit peaked.

"I thought you told me Brown said he wouldn't live to see the morning," Boswell said. "What sort of a bozo did you hire, anyway?"

"You gave me the number!"

Boswell looked thoughtfully at Sidney Markham. The man looked terrible. He obviously couldn't deal with the pressure. He might lose control at any moment.

"If this goes sour, Markham, it's *your* neck. Understand? *You're* the one who's been juggling the numbers. *You're* the one who's been living way beyond his means. *You're* the one who screwed up."

Sidney Markham went several shades paler. "But—but I've done everything according to your instructions! You can't deny that! We're both in this together!"

"I most certainly *can* deny it. And I will! There's not a single deal, Sidney—not a single bribe, nor a single misappropriation of company money—that can't be traced directly back to you. There's *nothing* that can be traced to me. *Nothing!*"

"I'll—I'll tell them everything!"

"Go ahead! But think—What evidence is there? *You* were always the one who made the payoffs. *You* kept the books. It's your word against mine, isn't it? Who do you think they're

going to believe?"

Sidney Markham collapsed into a nearby chair.

"Listen, Sidney, I'm only telling you this for your own good. So you won't get some crazy idea about running off to the federal people."

"I wouldn't do anything like that, Mr. Boswell. I'd never do anything like that."

"Of course you wouldn't, Sidney."

Like hell you wouldn't, Boswell thought.

Boswell turned his chair to look out the window. It had started to snow again. The flakes were large and feathery, drifting and spinning lazily down toward the street far below. The effect was almost hypnotic. Or maybe it was the pills that he had taken.

He turned back to the office. "Just try not to worry so much, Sidney. You've got to learn how to relax. I'm sure Brown will manage. After all, he *is* a professional."

Markham was looking at him strangely. He abruptly put his thumbnail to his mouth and began to gnaw.

Herbert Pipkin had made a slight navigational error that afternoon, somewhere back among the seemingly endless expanses of rain-grayed orange groves,

and had struck out down the length of Florida on U.S. 27. By the time he had realized his mistake, the Florida Turnpike exit had been left far behind.

No matter, he told himself. Twenty-seven would take him to Miami, even if it wasn't the most direct route. It was marked on the map as a four-lane all the way to a tiny circle labeled Okeelanta, which was at the southern edge of a large blue area that represented Lake Okeechobee. From Okeelanta, a thin red line stretched south-east across the Everglades to Miami.

He entered Okeelanta just as night was falling. The town was minuscule, and probably the last chance he would have to find something to eat before reaching Miami. He slowed as he approached a neon sign reading MOTEL-DINER, and turned into the parking lot. A truck with a semi-trailer in tow rolled in behind him, air brakes groaning, just as the sudden downpour began.

Herbert ran for the doorway to avoid getting soaked. He had an umbrella in the car, but for some reason was disinclined to take it inside.

Unnoticed, the car that had been following him all day pulled to a stop off to one side of the diner.

The diner was small, and

empty of customers. Apparently it was late for the dinner crowd. Heaps of soiled dishes stacked on a cart testified that the place had been busy earlier in the evening. Over against the wall, a jukebox intoned some mournful country and western melody.

Herbert climbed up on one of the chrome and vinyl stools lining the counter and absently watched a fly on a wedge of apple pie inside an open pie case.

The door opened again, and heavy footsteps approached from behind. The man who sat down at the end of the counter—the truck driver—was one of the biggest men Herbert had ever seen. The stool creaked beneath his weight.

A tired-looking waitress with bleached blonde hair appeared from the kitchen. "It's too late for dinner, but the grill's still open. What'll it be?"

Herbert squinted at the grill menu over the window opening into the kitchen. "I'll have a cheeseburger, french fries, and a cup of coffee."

"Right. What do you want on the burger?"

"Lettuce, tomato, mustard, and ketchup."

"How about the coffee?"

"Cream and two sugars, please."

"Cream and two sugars," she repeated. "It'll be a few min-

utes. The cook went home early." She glanced toward the truck driver. "What'll it be, Mac?"

"Gimme a tenderloin, cole-slaw, and a double order of fries."

"Coffee?"

"Yep. Black."

The door opened a third time, and a man in a dark overcoat took a seat at a table at the far end of the room. The waitress heaved a sigh, and went over to take his order. She then vanished through the kitchen door.

The jukebox fell silent. After a moment, the truck driver got up and went over to it, reaching in his pocket for change. He stood there with his back turned, studying the selections at his leisure.

Herbert glanced around for the restroom.

When he returned, the truck driver was punching buttons on the jukebox. The man in the dark overcoat—whom Herbert thought looked vaguely familiar—was standing at the counter, apparently studying the offerings inside the pie case. Herbert's coffee was at his elbow. As Herbert approached, he returned to his table.

The waitress brought out the plates of food. The truck driver returned to his stool, just as the waitress tipped cream into his coffee, and deposited two packets of sugar on his saucer.

"I wanted it black," he grumbled.

"Sorry. It's been a long day, ya know?" She switched the cup with Herbert's.

The man at the table behind them suddenly seemed to be choking.

"You okay back there, mister?" The waitress smiled wanly. "I haven't even served you yet."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm all right."

Twenty minutes later, Herbert paid his bill and turned to leave. The man at the table had already gone. The giant truck driver was staying for another cup of coffee, and a piece of apple pie.

Brown had pulled his car off the road and into the darkness at the edge of town. He sat there now with his lights out, watching for approaching headlights in his rear view mirror.

Pipkin had somehow done it again. The cup of coffee that had been intended for him—the one into which Brown had dropped the contents of half a dozen of the sleeping capsules he had found in the suitcase—had been gulped down by the giant truck driver.

He had intended that Pipkin fall asleep at the wheel of his car, somewhere on the deserted fifty-mile stretch of highway between Okeelanta and Miami. The resultant accident would

of course, have proved tragically fatal. If not immediately, at least as soon as Brown had arrived on the scene.

Headlights shone in the distance. Brown clenched his teeth.

This time there would be no error.

As soon as he had left the diner, Brown had gone over to Pipkin's station wagon and cut the sidewall of his right front tire. Not all the way through. Just enough to guarantee a blowout, once they were out on the rain-slick highway.

Pipkin's white Honda zipped past him in the night. Brown smiled. He pulled back onto the road, and set off in pursuit.

Half an hour later, he was still following. During those thirty minutes he had not passed a single oncoming car, nor had he even once glimpsed lights in his rear view mirror.

They were now somewhere on that twenty-mile stretch of Highway 27 that cuts across the eastern-most portion of the Everglades—a lonely, eerie, alligator-infested marshland, where a body could easily vanish without so much as a trace.

It won't be long now, Pipkin, Brown thought to himself.

With any luck at all, Pipkin would skid off the road and be knocked senseless by the impact. He could then add the finishing touches with a tire iron.

Or, if he came upon him standing in the road preparing to fix the flat, he could make it look like the hit-and-run accident he had originally intended.

If running over Pipkin were to prove impractical, he would stop to offer him assistance. He would then simply blow him away with his .44, and throw what remained into the ditch alongside the road. By morning, the body would be long gone. He could drive Pipkin's car on in to Miami, and abandon it there. That way, even if there *were* something left to find, they wouldn't have the vaguest idea where to look.

He would think of Pipkin every time he wore his alligator shoes.

Up ahead, beyond the slashing windshield wipers, the distant taillights of Pipkin's car suddenly slipped from side to side, brightening and dimming as he frantically pumped his brakes to control the unexpected skid.

Brown turned out his headlights, and reduced his speed to a snail's pace.

Pipkin had turned on his emergency blinkers. Apparently he had managed to keep the car on the road. It was very dark. Too dark for Brown to see where he was. The hit-and-run ploy would be too dangerous. So, Brown thought. It would be the gun.

Brown narrowed the gap between himself and his quarry to about a hundred yards, then pulled off to the side of the road. He had decided to try to take Pipkin unawares, without employing the Good Samaritan pretext.

Up ahead, Pipkin was moving around his car with a flashlight.

Brown checked his .44 in the dark. He reached up to turn off the courtesy light, lest the opening of the door give away his presence. Cocking the big revolver, he stepped out onto the pavement.

It was still raining. That was good, Brown thought. A .44 did an unbelievable amount of damage. There was always a lot of blood. The rain would wash it away.

He approached to within fifty feet, then stopped in the middle of the road. He would let Pipkin finish changing the tire, then do it. Pipkin had caused him more than enough inconvenience already.

The swamp on either side of the highway was alive with the sounds of bullfrogs, alligators, insects, and Lord knew what else. It sounded like the soundtrack of a Tarzan movie. Pipkin was finishing up, heaving the ruined tire into the back of his station wagon.

Brown walked toward him, along the white line marking

the center of the road. Excellent, he thought. He dropped into a crouch and raised the bulky revolver slowly with both hands, as if he were on a target range. He was scarcely ten feet from the unsuspecting Pipkin's back.

He hesitated.

He wanted to see the look of surprise on Pipkin's face when the slug hit him.

He drew in a deep breath. *"Die, Pipkin!"*

The shout was lost in the roar of a diesel engine as sixty-five thousand pounds of tractor and semi-trailer came hurtling out of the night at a speed in excess of seventy miles per hour, passing directly over the spot where Brown was crouching. The impact was so great that what remained of Mr. Brown landed in the ditch a hundred feet farther up the road.

By morning, of course, not a trace would remain.

Pipkin spun around, just in time to see the taillights of the truck disappearing into the mists. He shook his fist in impotent rage. "You crazy drunken fool! You could have killed me!"

The driver of the truck, of course, was neither drunken nor crazy but nodding at the wheel as a heavy dose of barbiturates began to take effect. The following morning would find him waking up where he

had finally pulled off the road, wondering how he had come to have a dented grill and broken headlight.

The second day of Herbert's Miami vacation was going very well, indeed. He breathed a heavy sigh of contentment. He sat in a chaise longue at the edge of a sky-blue pool, sipping a Planter's Punch and watching bikini-clad bodies moving to and fro from behind his dark glasses. The sun was very warm, and it made him a little drowsy.

The first day, there had been a minor problem. He had called Sidney Markham—out of courtesy—to advise him that he would be out of town for a few days, and that he wouldn't be done with the audit as soon as he had originally expected. The man had suddenly become irrational, heaping abuse on Herbert in language that he had previously encountered only on the walls of public restrooms. This had prompted Herbert to become uncharacteristically bold, and he had responded with something along the lines of: "Well, if you don't think I can handle the audit to your satisfaction, perhaps I'd better just turn your books over to somebody who can." Then he had hung up.

Mother would probably disapprove, he thought guiltily.

At that moment, a modestly

attired young lady sat down on the recliner next to the one he occupied. She cast a shy smile in Herbert's direction, then opened a copy of *The American Accountant's Quarterly*.

Hang the books! Herbert thought to himself. Markham had told him there was no hurry, and he wasn't going to let worrying about them spoil his vacation. They could just find themselves another CPA. Nobody pushes around Herbert T. Pipkin!

“I know it's all been a shock to you,” Detective Larkin said consolingly, “but it's very important that we try to get all the details straight while they're still fresh in your mind. Just what was it that happened yesterday?”

“I'm not sure,” said the secretary. “There was a phone call from Miami. Someone wanting to talk to Mr. Markham.”

“Do you know who it was?”

“No. I can't remember.”

“And Mr. Markham took the call?”

“Yes. He took it in his office.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well, after a few moments, the light on my extension went out, so I knew the call was over. Then Mr. Markham came out

of his office. He looked — strange.”

“How do you mean?”

“I don't know, exactly. Worried, I guess. And excited.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Not a word. It was as if he didn't even see me. He just went straight into Mr. Boswell's office.”

She wrinkled her brow, suddenly lost in thought.

“What is it? You remembered something?”

“Just that he didn't knock.” She looked up. “Mr. Boswell was very strict about that.”

“And then what happened?”

“Mr. Markham closed the door when he went in. Then there was shouting.”

“Who was shouting?”

“First Mr. Boswell, then Mr. Markham. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but they both sounded angry.”

“And then?”

“It got very quiet. Then there was that terrible crash.”

“Did you go right in?”

“No, I buzzed first. I went in when Mr. Boswell didn't answer.”

“What did you find?”

She looked up, her eyes damp. “Nothing. The room was empty. Just the desk, the chairs, and—and that big broken window.”

Just the Trees

by Esther J. Holt



The evergreen trees when the wind blew looked like ladies in ruffled gowns doing some kind of clog. They were in two ragged rows; in some places they were scattered, with wide spaces in between, but between the two houses they were bunched and crowded. They protected the Chandlers' house from the wind. And there was something in them.

At least that's what Eva kept telling Edward. Jokingly, of course. He just laughed with her. He and the original owner of the other house had set in the seedlings together. He knew what was in there.

The present tenant of the other house didn't laugh. He seemed to take it as a personal insult as he did everything else she did. He'd been disgruntled with her for three years, but lately he'd begun screaming every time he caught her putting food scraps under the trees.

"You know you only encourage those strays to hang around. Then they upset the garbage cans all over. All but yours, of course."

"Only yours, Mr. Gates."

If Mrs. Gates heard him out there yelling, she always came out and ordered him back in. Funny. He was a super-smooth insurance agent and a bully—until his wife spoke. If he had been one of the dogs he hated, he'd have cowered at her feet.

"I see Gates caught you again," Edward said mildly when she took the plate back in.

"I wish the trees were all on our property." She all but threw the plate into the sink. "It's lucky, I guess, they only rent, or he'd have cut them long ago."

"Well, as long as you have Jessie Gates on your side." He went back to his paper.

After Eva finished the dishes, she went out to wander about in the lawn, searching the flowering bushes for leaf buds. The ground was still springy with soaked-in rain and snow. From the swamp beyond the woods bordering the back ends of the lots, she heard the peepers start up. A cat from one of the other houses strolled by her. Nothing ran from Eva.

"Stay off Gates's property or he'll eat you."

The cat gave her a look that said, "Just let him try."

Eva never actually saw any dogs going into the clump of trees, but the next time she placed food there, even the bones were gone. Several of the neighbors had dogs that roamed the area. Maybe she didn't notice them because they were just another part of the landscape.

Jessie Gates came from her back porch to walk over to meet her.

"Sorry about that. Again." She was a slim attractive woman in her late forties who never raised her voice to anyone but her husband.

"It's all right. Again. What we need is all for the trees to be as close as they are between the houses. Then he couldn't see me."

"He'd just have to find something else to be unhappy about."

"Someday the trees are going to get him."

They both laughed.

Mr. Gates went after the whole neighborhood by calling the animal enforcement officer—the dog catcher. Instead of snatching every dog in sight, the man gave the people time to confine their pets in their own yards. When he came back to check, everything was in order.

Forgetting the new order of things one evening, Eva placed some steak scraps and leftover vegetables under the trees. Mr. Gates came storming across his lawn.

"That stuff is going to lie there and rot and smell up the place. Clean it up."

"Oh, Mr. Gates, don't you have anything better to do than to watch me all the time?"

She turned and went back into the house.

"Why don't you dump the stuff up this way more? Then he couldn't see you," Edward said reasonably.

"Because I've always put it there, that's why. And that's where the dogs are used to finding it. Why don't you go out and punch Mr. Gates?"

"Fifty is too old to be punching people. Besides, I think your method of passive resistance is harder on him than a punch in the nose."

"Would you at least defend me if he became physically abusive?" she asked.

"I'd take a two-by-four after him." He took her in his arms.

The next evening the scraps were gone, as usual. If the tame dogs were all tied up, then there must be strays coming in from the woods. It didn't matter to Eva. A dog was a dog. She fed them.

Mr. Gates reported her for dumping garbage. When nothing was to be found, Jessie hauled him into the house where she could be heard raking him over the coals. Neither of them came back out to enjoy the rest of the balmy spring evening.

"We could sell the house and move," Edward teased.

"Thank you, no. He'll give in before I do."

"I think if he keeps on the neighbors will get up a petition against him."

"Unless my trees get him first," she said smugly.

"You sound as if you're beginning to believe that. Next he'll be calling the banana wagon for you." He laughed.

The tongue-lashing must have done some good. Except for when he was riding his mower, Mr. Gates avoided the side yard. He left it to Edward to mow around the trees with his self-propelled mower.

"You know, the dogs either eat the bones or carry them off. I always look out that I don't run over any with the mower and there aren't any."

"I've been throwing scraps in there for years, but thanks to Mr. Gates it has become our chief topic of conversation. Let's get off it for a while," she sighed.

It was the middle of the hot summer when Jessie Gates died. She fell down the cellar stairs and broke her neck. Conveniently while Gates was out of the house.

The police looked the scene over and called it an accident. Eva called it murder, but only to Edward. And then not very loud. All the windows were open.

"How can you think that?" Edward waited until they were in bed with the window fan going. He was afraid for her. "Gates was in his office downtown. He saw people all morning."

"He could have rigged up something. Something on the stairs to trip her. And he had time to remove it before he called the ambulance."

"They didn't have kids or he could have used one of their skates." He was humoring her.

"Or a skateboard." She sat upright. "Anybody can go in any store and pick up a skateboard."

"How would he know that on that particular day Jessie would be going to the cellar and make sure he had an alibi?" He reached up and pulled her back down beside him. "And how would he know it would kill her? She could have seen whatever he had rigged and known what he was doing."

"I don't know how, or why she wouldn't have seen the trap, but he's around people every day. Any day would have done. Just as any day you want to invite him to lunch will do."

It was his turn to sit up.

"Go to lunch. Why would I take Gates to lunch?"

"So I can go into the house and look for whatever he used to make her fall." She had liked Jessie Gates. Her death made Eva angry.

"Why would I ask him now after all these years? Answer me that."

"Because he's alone now. He has no real friends."

"He doesn't seem to want any. Besides, chances are there isn't anything. And it's too dangerous. What if I couldn't hold him long enough or he became suspicious? The invitation itself is suspect."

"No. He'll think it's a good chance to play bereaved husband. Treat him to a three-martini lunch."

"I don't even have one-martini lunches." He lay back down. "I don't suppose I can talk you out of this."

"I'll think of another way if I have to."

"Very well then." He reached over to kiss her. "I'll set it up for one day next week, just to get it over with. I liked Jessie, too."

Edward began strolling over in the evenings to chat with Gates sitting in his back yard. He felt he couldn't just suddenly ask Gates to lunch. It did help that he'd never gone out to take Eva's side in the battles over the scraps.

Wednesday Edward came back looking satisfied but far from pleased. She knew the time had come.

"You haven't said yet how you plan to get in."

"With Jessie's help. She lost her housekey so often she finally put an extra one between the back porch railing and one of the posts. Gates never knew it. It would have been one more thing for him to growl about."

"Gates and I are going to the Businessmen's Club lunch together. I'll call after we get there. Make it look like I'm calling my office."

Eva waited all morning for the call she knew wouldn't come until twelve thirty. She couldn't make sense out of her usual Thursday work, so she went for a walk along the road past the high hedge fronting the Gates' property, toward the dairy farm just beyond. It was separated from the Gates place by a fence and more hedge. Anyone who had ever lived there chose it for the privacy. Children in the neighborhood avoided it.

After the weird phone call when Edward called her Miss Sims and reminded her to gather information from those surveys, Eva strolled across the lawn toward the thickest part of the trees. The center space where four of them came together was covered with brown needles, a spongy, pungent-smelling haven.

But there wasn't time to play it safe. She moved the jagged limbs aside to emerge in Gates's yard. The hot sun bounced off the white two story house. She wiped sticky hands on her faded jeans.

Running lightly in her jogging shoes, Eva reached the back porch and searched with shaky fingers for the key. Poking it out of its hiding place, she knocked it to the porch where it bounced off into the grass below.

Frantically she ran down the few steps to the area just in front of the lattice porch curtain to run her fingers through grass in need of cutting. A fingernail clicked against the key. Clutching it in her hand, she ran back up the steps to unlock the door leading into the kitchen.

She was surprised by the neatness she found there until she remembered Gates would have kept on their cleaning woman.

"This is no time to be looking for dust," she told herself.

Going to the cellar door, she was surprised by the locked sliding bolt. There was a padlock as well on the outside slanted doors, but

that was natural. She slid back the bolt, pushed the door inward, and stepped onto the small landing at the head of the steep stairs. Light from several narrow windows flooded the cellar.

Gates had never before come home during the day that they knew of, but Edward had warned her they could never tell what he would do. She was to hurry with her search and get out of there.

Jessie had once mentioned the old fruit cellar they never used. Eva began there. It smelled like damp soil and held nothing but shelves of empty jars, old crocks, and cobwebs in a celebration of spiders. Some of them were pulled loose when she opened the door. No need to search there.

An old kitchen cabinet stood next to Gates's work area. It was full of paint cans and motor oil. Nothing under it.

The laundry area was open and clear of any hiding place, as was the space around the gas furnace. Even the rafters were bare. Edward had all kinds of hooks and hangers in their rafters.

"I'll have the upstairs to go through now."

She started up the steep stairs, and came up against a well-pressed pair of trouser legs. It was so unexpected she nearly tried to brush them aside, but there was no moving them.

"Mrs. Chandler, what are you doing invading my privacy?" Looking down at her from the added height of the steps seemed to give him an extra measure of menace. It wouldn't do to be flippant with him this time.

"I'm looking for the tool you used to kill your wife with," she blurted out, too startled to hide the truth. Throwing her shoulders back, she glared at him. "You did murder her, and everyone in the neighborhood knows."

"The police call it an accident, and that's what's important." He came on down the stairs, forcing her back. If he'd just move away from the stairs. She backed up to draw him out to the open floor. "And after the stories they heard from my loving neighbors, they did question me thoroughly."

"Police must believe there is truth to some rumors. What did you do with my Edward?" She must not let hysteria take over or she'd be completely helpless.

"That's the trouble with you women. You marry a man and suddenly he's all yours. I wondered why, after all this time, he was being so neighborly, so I had my secretary give me a call saying I was needed back at the office. I came straight here." She'd never considered Gates a handsome man; now his gloating made him ugly. "He's still having lunch."

"Oh." She should have left Edward a message of farewell. She'd been so sure of herself. "What happens now? You can't use the same method twice."

"No, especially since I got rid of the skateboard."

He laughed at her shocked expression. "You guessed something like that? Very bright. I bought it out at the mall. Uncles are always buying toys like that. Then I dropped it in the park one night. While the police were here, it was in the trunk of my car."

"So what method do you have in mind for me?" She would not give in and beg. She simply couldn't. Oh, Edward, give me strength.

"We're going back upstairs." He stood aside to let her go first. "I'm going to come in from outside and, blinded by the sudden change of light, shoot someone coming at me. I won't know it's you until it's too late. And I did leave my doors locked this morning."

A gun. There was nothing to do but give up. She couldn't win against a gun. Especially one she couldn't see.

Where was it? His jacket pockets weren't sagging.

"I wouldn't dream of trying anything." Using the banisters for support, she began backing slowly up the stairs. He started to follow.

She was not an athletic woman, but fear, desperation, and a need to see Edward again made her strong. The banisters supported her as she put all her weight into her right leg.

"Ooff!" Her rubber-toed jogging shoe hit him squarely in the midriff, and he doubled over, trying at the same time to grab her. She kicked at the groping hand and turned to scramble awkwardly up the stairs.

Still in a bent position she scurried across the kitchen floor to the back door. The telephone shrilled through the empty rooms. Probably Edward calling to warn her he'd lost Gates. Hysterical whimpers burst from her at each step. She put her hand over her mouth.

"I'll get you!"

Gates was lumbering up the stairs as she jumped the back steps and ran straight for the sheltering trees. Fear caused her joints to lock. He would surely catch her and kill her there among the trees.

When she reached them, the trees seemed to give way more easily than usual as she ran between them and out the other side.

"You're not free yet!" She heard him crashing into them.

Something, some sound, made her turn. The trees seemed to dance madly in a clog that went faster and faster.

The next sound sent her reeling backward. She stood there trying

to wrap her arms over her ears to shut out the screams coming from the center of the trees. Hands grasped at her. She fought them off until she caught a glimpse of Edward's anguished face. She clung to him.

Edward held her head pressed between his chest and his hand, but she could still hear it. The scream that began to sound like an animal being beaten.

"He got away from me. I got Ray Shaver to call the house and then the police. I came straight home. What the hell is going on in there? Did you see any dogs?"

"No, no dogs. Just the trees."

"Oh, my God! You mean—"

A murmur of voices separate from the screams turned them toward the road. Cars had stopped. People from them joined the neighbors standing along the edge of the lawn.

The beaten-animal sounds faded and died, to be replaced by the screaming of a siren. Two uniformed officers ran toward them. The wild clogging stopped.

"In there." Edward indicated the trees. "Gates. He tried to kill my wife."

"Did you kill him instead?" The older officer stayed with them while the other one pushed his way into the trees.

"Of course not. I haven't even seen him."

"Hey, Davis, come over here. You have to see for yourself." The young officer stumbled out, looking as if he'd seen the end of the world.

"What is it?"

Edward and Eva followed, with the neighbors closing in around them.

"I guess if they say it's Gates then it must be Gates." His head moved in disbelief.

"Was it the dogs? He was always calling about the dogs. Did any of you see any dogs come out of there?" The older officer turned to the crowd.

"The dogs are all tied up and the dog officer has picked up the strays," Edward volunteered.

"No, it wasn't dogs. Or," the young officer added quickly, "anything else you could see. But his face looks like he saw every monster from hell right there in the trees."

"I told you—"

The look in Edward's eyes silenced Eva.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

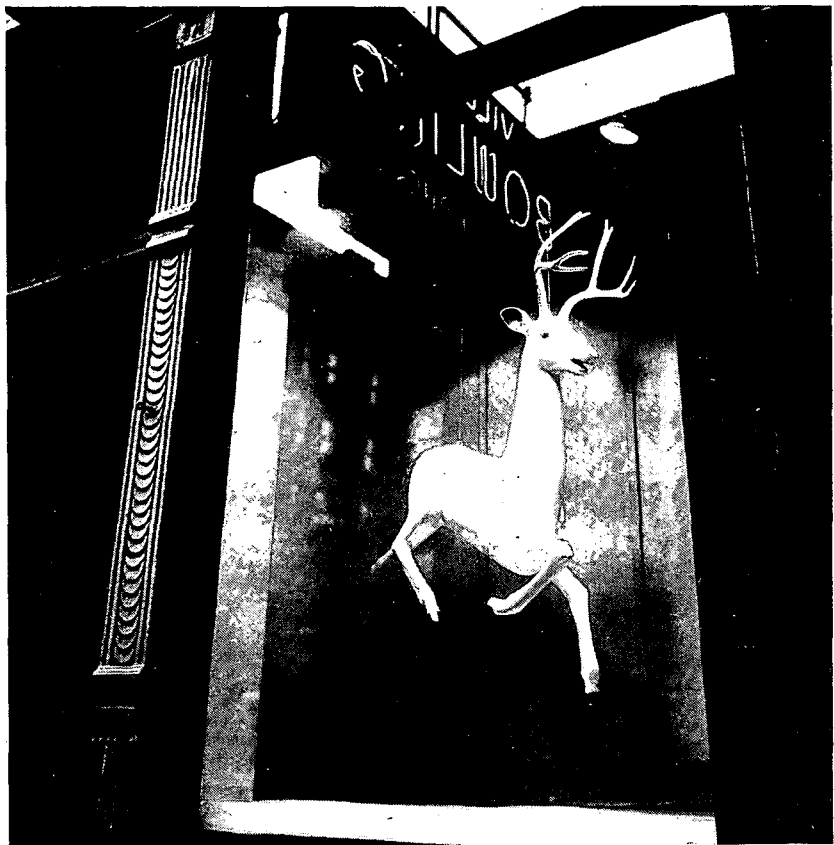


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You've heard of carrier pigeons? Well . . . We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

The Qatar Causeway

by Josh Pachter



Sinterklaas, kapoentje,
 Gooi wat in m'n
 schoentje!
 Gooi wat in m'n laarsje!
 Dank je, Sinterklaasje!

The tall, thin man in the long red robe and cotton beard was circled by a ring of gaily-dressed children who sang and giggled as they skipped around him hand in hand. His merry eyes

sparkled behind the small round lenses of his wire-rimmed spectacles, his bishop's mitre sat snugly on his head, his golden staff glittered cheerfully in the bright fluorescent lighting of the messroom. Outside the ring of children stood half a dozen gangly youths in gaudy pantaloons and floppy felt hats, their faces glistening with coal-black greasepaint, their lips daubed

Illustration by Jim Odbert

a rich crimson. Each of them held a bulky burlap sack in his ebony hands.

The bearded figure in the robe was not the only adult present. The parents of the dancers were there, too, clustered in groups of three and four around the walls of the room, sipping strong coffee and watching their sons and daughters enjoying the party. And off in a corner stood a small-framed Pakistani in the olive green uniform of Bahrain's Public Security Force, listening earnestly to the explanations of the stocky business-suited man at his side.

The stocky man in the business suit was not a businessman. He was Roelof Smit, a detective lieutenant with the Amsterdam police, and he was visiting Bahrain to observe the workings of the emirate's law enforcement machinery. Since the abortive coup attempt in 1978, fully two-thirds of the island's security troops were Pakistanis, fiercely loyal to the Arab government that employed them; Mahboob Chaudri, originally from Karachi, was the *mahsool* who had been assigned to work with the Dutchman during the two weeks of his stay.

Today was December fifth, Sinterklaas, and Smit had brought his host out to al-

Qalat—the housing compound of the Dutch construction company Nederbild—for the festivities.

"What are they singing?" asked Chaudri, his English careful and lightly accented.

Smit's walrus mustache shivered with pleasure. "It's a simple little song," he chuckled, "and typical of the spirit of the holiday. Let's see if I can translate it for you: 'Sinterklaas, you little elf'—because, you see, the 'tje' or 'je' at the end of every line is our way of saying 'little' or 'cute'—'Sinterklaas, you little elf, leave some goodies on my shelf! Leave some candy in my shoe—thank you, Sinterklaas, thank you!' That's not a literal translation, you understand, but it gives you the general idea of the thing—and at least it rhymes."

"And, lieutenant, is it typical of the spirit of the holiday?"

The Dutchman laughed again. "In most Western countries, Christmas has become so commercialized that it's hard to remember its original religious significance. Well, we Hollanders have our spiritual side, like everyone else, and the spiritualist in us wants to keep Christmas a holy day. But we're a practical people, too, and our practical side tells us that we can't just ignore the commercial aspects of the Christmas

season. So we invented Sinterklaas. This way, we can stay quietly religious on Kerstmis—in fact, we've even added on a second Christmas Day, December 26th—because we've gotten all the shopping and gift-giving out of our systems three weeks earlier, on the fifth, on Sinterklaas.

"Like the American Santa Claus, our Christmas Man—the Kerstman—is fat and jolly. Sinterklaas is also jolly, but he's much more, ah, *netjes*. 'Distinguished,' that's the word. After all, he is a saint, you know—Sint Nicolaas, which is where the names Sinterklaas and Santa Claus both come from. Every year he travels all the way to Holland from Spain, by steamboat, with his band of helpers—the Zwarte Piets, or Black Peters. Foreigners sometimes misunderstand, and object to the Piets. But they're helpers, not slaves, and there's really nothing racist about them. Besides, the children love them, and I don't know *what* would happen if we ever tried to get rid of them!"

The children finished their song to loud applause, with Chaudri and Smit joining in wholeheartedly, then whirled away from Saint Nicholas to face the crowd of Black Peters. Burlap sacks were flung wide, black hands dug deep, and the

boys and girls exploded with cries of "Piet! Piet!" as the saint's assistants showered them with fistfuls of candy and tiny ginger cookies.

"*Strooigoed and pepernoten*," Roelof Smit informed his companion—and then a real explosion sounded from somewhere outside, and every window in the messhall shattered inward in a horror of screams and flying glass.

Shobbing children, panic-stricken adults, the floor littered with a mosaic of candy and glass, the dull reverberation of the blast shaking the walls and deafening the ears.

When at last the first shock faded, Sinterklaas ripped off his beard and mitre and flung away his staff and raced out the back door of the building. Chaudri and Smit were close behind him, their feet slipping on the shards of glass and sticking on the gooey candy.

At the door, Chaudri grabbed a bewildered father by the front of his shirt. "Sir!" he shouted into the vacant face. "Is there a hospital here on the compound?"

There was no reaction.

"A hospital! A doctor! Some of these children have been hurt! Is there anyone here to help them?" Chaudri shook the

man violently until at last he blinked his eyes and nodded.

"A hospital," he repeated softly. "Yes." A thin line of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, and he licked it away absently.

"Get someone here to look after these people!" Chaudri cried, releasing him. "Hurry!"

Suddenly awakening, the man muttered, "*Ja, natuurlijk!*" and jumped for a telephone.

With a last look back at the confusion in the room, Chaudri and Smit went out the door. Sinterklaas was standing on the narrow strip of rocky beach that lay between the messhall and the blue-green iridescence of the gulf. A half-mile to the north, the skeleton of a bridge under construction reached across the water to a small islet not far offshore. A dense cloud of grey smoke billowed up from the point where the bridge met the islet, staining the pale blue of the sky and spreading evilly.

"*Mijn God,*" Sinterklaas whispered, and when Chaudri looked at him, he saw tears in the man's tired eyes. "*Oh, mijn hemel.*"

"What is it?" he asked. "What's happened?"

"My bridge," Sinterklaas replied. "They've blown it up."

"*They?* Who are *they*?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know. He. She. They.

Someone. It doesn't matter who. They've destroyed my bridge."

"What do you mean, *your* bridge?"

At last the man turned towards him. "Come with me," he said, recognizing Chaudri's uniform, "and I'll tell you."

"Where are you going?"

The man in the red robe pointed a trembling finger towards the offshore islet, where the heavy grey smoke was draped across the sky like a shroud. "Out there," he said, and his voice was dull and dead.

"My name, if you can believe it," the man introduced himself, "is Nicolaas. Nicolaas Sjollema. When I was a boy, the other children used to call me Sinterklaas. I always wanted to play the part for real, and today—today was my first chance."

They were in Sjollema's car, a Japanese import with right-hand drive, barreling along a rough dirt track toward the company harbor. Chaudri, in the passenger seat on the left, found himself automatically trying to brake and steer; in the back, Roelof Smit clenched his teeth on the stem of an ornate meerscham pipe and jounced.

"I'm the foreman on this phase of the construction project,"

Sjollema went on. He had taken off his robe, revealing faded denims and a chambray work-shirt. "I didn't design it and I'm not paying for it, but I'm in charge of building it. That's why I call it *my* bridge. I've been with the project for three years, now—well, almost three years—and I feel as if it's become my child, my son."

"An expensive son to raise," remarked Smit from the rear.

Sjollema smiled grimly. "The second most expensive stretch of highway in the world," he agreed. "Concrete piles sunk into the sea floor, with four-lane slabs of roadbed the length of football fields laid on top of them. About thirty-two kilometers long from here to Qatar, at a total construction cost of more than half a *billion* dollars: that's over fifteen thousand dollars a meter. An expensive child, *inderdaad*."

Chaudri's right foot pumped the spot where the brake pedal should have been as the car squealed to a stop inches away from a modern pier lined with launches and a long, flat-bedded barge. The only craft showing any signs of life was an old wooden fishing dhow, its mast horizontal, its canvas sail spread out as a sunscreen. A powerfully-built Arab in a grimy, once-white *thobe*, his *ghutra* wrapped carelessly about his

head, was standing in the stern, shaded by the sail overhead and cutting a squid into bait-sized pieces. In the prow a young boy—naked except for worn cut-off shorts, his skin charred black by the sun—sat hunched over a spool of nylon, his fingers moving swiftly as he tied a heavy barbed hook to the free end of the line. Neither of them paid the slightest attention to the dark smoke that still rose from the offshore islet. To see them at work—stolid, emotionless, completely absorbed in their tasks—it was hard to remember that, not fifteen minutes earlier, not a thousand meters away, the world had been rocked by a devastating blast. They were living in their own dimension, in another century, where all that mattered was the frantic pull of a ten pound *hamour* as it strained to loosen the killing barb from its cheek.

"We need to go out there, to Umm as Hawwak," Sjollema told the fisherman, who raised his head slowly and regarded them without interest.

"*La, la,*" the Arab said tonelessly, not singing but refusing. "No, no."

"Police business." Chaudri's Arabic was crisp. "Let's go."

The fisherman shrugged his shoulders and, as Chaudri and the two Dutchmen climbed

aboard, put his knife aside and moved to his vessel's primitive controls. Moments later the engine was growling; the weathered deckboards trembled beneath their feet as the boat pulled ponderously away from the dock.

"At least there's no one working out there today," Sjollema sighed. "I don't want to *think* about what would have happened if..." He left the sentence unfinished.

"You shut down construction for Sinterklaas?" asked Smit.

"Oh, no, not that. But this is Friday, the Muslim day of rest. We employ very few Arabs, but we observe their work week—like all foreign companies in Bahrain. Takes a while for our people to get used to, but it seems the simplest way to schedule in the long run."

The water was made of emeralds, frosted with the pearly turbulence of the dhow's wake and the reflected glitter of the late afternoon sun. Halfway across to Umm as Hawwak, the fisherman's son stabbed a finger off to port and cried, "*Uthor! Look!*" Chaudri spun around in time to see a gunmetal grey tailfin wave a greeting at them and disappear beneath the surface of the sea.

"Dolphin," he said. "Do you have them in your country, too?"

Roelof Smit shook his head. "Not like that. Only in the sea-quarium, trained to jump through hoops and balance beach balls on their noses."

The dhow's engine stuttered and stopped. For a moment, as they glided the last few meters to the islet's wooden mooring, silence engulfed them. Then they could hear the lapping of waves on the shore and the sad crackle of brush fires dying.

Chaudri ordered the fisherman to wait, and they left the boat for the desolate islet. There was rubble everywhere, blackened clumps of shattered concrete, the ruins of what must have been supply sheds and temporary office space, machinery twisted beyond recognition. What little vegetation Umm as Hawwak had supported was cinders now; scattered tongues of flame licked hungrily at the last remaining morsels of green. Here and there were geckos—the small, scurrying lizards which the Arabs claimed brought luck to the home. Many of them were missing their tails or heads or limbs; all of them were dead.

"Who could have had a motive for doing this?" Roelof Smit was numb with the horror of the scene.

His countryman shook his head despondently. "I don't know," he said. "It doesn't make

any sense. If it had been the Saudi causeway, which another company is building on the other side of the country, I could understand it. That's a controversial project and there's been a lot of opposition to it. But if there's anything at all the people of Bahrain are in agreement on, it's that this bridge across to Qatar is a good thing. Trade will be easier in both directions, and the security of both countries will be strengthened. I—"

Sjollema turned away from them and walked off. Roelof Smit hesitated for a moment, then went after him, leaving Chaudri alone in the rubble.

He watched them go, watched Smit catch up to the other man and put a hand to his elbow, watched them reboard the dhow and sit side by side in its stern, Sjollema with his head in his hands and Smit with an arm around the foreman's shoulder.

The sea birds were beginning to return to the islet, squawking angrily at the invasion of their privacy. The hum of a motor launch's powerful engine grew louder; by now, several craft were setting out towards Umm as Hawwak from the dock on the mainland.

Mahboob Chaudri hunkered down on the ground, selected a small chunk of scorched concrete from the debris at his feet, and passed it slowly from hand

to hand. This morning a bridge stood here, he thought, and now I sit here with its ruined remnants in my hand. Tomorrow the Dutchmen will go back to work, and they will build the bridge again.

It is a wheel, he decided. An ever-spinning wheel of life and death.

He rose, slipped the fragment of concrete into his pocket as a reminder of the day's events, and stepped carefully through the rubble towards the waiting dhow.

The Bahraini headquarters of Nederbild BV occupied the fifth and sixth floors of a concrete and glass tower in the al-Khalifa Road, in the center of Manama's business district. When Mahboob Chaudri and Roelof Smit stepped off the elevator into the sixth floor reception area at eight o'clock the next morning, the atmosphere of tension that washed over them was even more noticeable than the chill of the air conditioning.

The blonde receptionist was pretty, Chaudri supposed, if you liked European women, but he found her neckline and the tightness of her sweater immodest. She looked shocked when he asked for the firm's managing director, and assured them that Mr. Hofstra was much

too busy to see them. When Smit explained the purpose of their visit to her in rapid Dutch, though—the only words Chaudri could make out were “*bom*” and “*explosie*”—she frowned nervously and ushered them along a carpeted corridor to the executive suite. Her tailored tan skirt ended an inch above her knees, and she wore spiked high heels that accented the firmness of her calves.

Shameful, Mahboob Chaudri thought as they followed her. His own dear wife Shazia would be ashamed to be seen in such garments. He would never understand these Western women, he knew, never.

Hendrik Hofstra's office was a large, plush room with a picture window running the length of one wall and looking out over the *suq*. A second wall was covered with an artist's rendering of the causeway, sketched in bold, confident strokes that contrasted starkly with the smoldering reality of the scene at Umm as Hawwak. A scale model of the bridge stood on a table in the center of the room, complete with tiny vehicles frozen in mid-transit. Hofstra's oversized desk was in a corner by the window, cluttered with papers and books and rolls of blueprints; on the wall behind it were half a dozen framed photographs of a towheaded child

of six or seven, sometimes alone and sometimes with a rather plain, large-boned woman who could only be the boy's mother.

Hofstra himself was a middle-aged bantam rooster in a badly-cut grey suit, his tie pulled loose and his collar button undone. What he lacked in stature, though, he made up for in temper. “Hofstra,” he introduced himself abruptly. He offered them neither a handshake nor a seat. “I've got almost two hundred meters of downed roadway to rebuild, gentlemen, and I need to get that done in about one week and without spending a *stuiver* if I want to keep this project on schedule and under budget. What do you want?”

“Information, sir,” Chaudri began. “About the bombing. I am Mahboob Chaudri, and this is Lieutenant Smit of the Amsterdam police.”

“The Amsterdam police!” Hofstra roared. “Listen here, Mr. Tawdry, or whatever your name is: I've got a twenty-five man security team out there on Umm as Hawwak right now, turning that little islet upside down. They don't need any help from you, and they *potverdorie* don't need any help from the Amsterdam police!”

“Lieutenant Smit is here only as an observer, sir,” said Chaudri implacably, “and as

for me, when the crime of industrial sabotage is committed on Bahraini soil, our Public Security Force is charged with conducting a complete investigation of its own. As I was on the scene at the time of the explosion, my superiors have assigned me to the case."

"The case," Hofstra fumed. It was clear that he realized he was in the wrong, and equally clear that he was unhappy about it. "All right, then. Ask your questions."

"Our explosives experts were on the islet within an hour of the blast yesterday afternoon. They report having found traces of at least nine separate charges and possibly more, spaced ten to twenty meters apart and simultaneously detonated by a single timing mechanism which was put in place beneath the roadway no more than twenty-four hours before the explosion. Several indications lead to the conclusion that the charges and timer were set by a single individual."

"I got that information from my own people last night, Mr. Tawdry, now—"

"The name is Chaudri, sir. Excuse me."

"Mr. Chaudri, then. Now, what do you *want*?"

Chaudri pulled a notebook and a pen from the pocket of his uniform shirt. "I would like to

know who had access to Umm as Hawwak during the twenty-four hours that preceded the blast, Mr. Hofstra. I would like to know who had the opportunity to set those charges."

"*Getverdemme*." Hofstra ran a hand through his close-cropped, greying hair. "The islet was not guarded, Mr. Chaudri. Night before last, any *uilskuiken* with a boat could have gone out there completely unobserved."

"A half-billion dollar project and you leave it *unguarded*?" Smit was incredulous.

"Left it unguarded. We won't make that mistake again."

"But you made it once?" the Dutch policeman insisted.

Hofstra answered through clenched teeth. "Yes, Lieutenant Smit, we made that mistake once. This is Bahrain, lieutenant, not the Zeedijk in Amsterdam. We were led to believe that the local police"—he glared angrily at Chaudri—"had created a climate of order here where we wouldn't need to worry about theft or sabotage. Do you have any further questions?"

"You suggested that the charges could have been set on the evening of the fourth of December," said Mahboob Chaudri, "or in the early morning hours of the fifth. What about the afternoon of the fourth, a full day ahead of the explosion?"

"We had a crew working out there from eight A.M. until six P.M. Anybody crawling around setting explosives would have been seen."

"But what about the crew themselves? Could one of them have done it?"

"How would I know? I wasn't out there, I was here. Ask Nick Sjollema that kind of question. It's his job to know who's where at all times. Anything else?"

Chaudri looked up from his notebook. "One possibility, Mr. Hofstra, is that the bridge was blown up by a former employee, someone nursing a grudge against Nederbild. Have any of your people been let go recently?"

The director glanced impatiently at his watch. "Mr. Chaudri," he said slowly. "Nederbild BV has over twelve hundred employees in Bahrain, from cleaning ladies through senior executives here in this building, from gate guards and maintenance men to a twenty-four-hour child-care center at the al-Qarat housing compound, and from construction workers all the way up to Nicolaas Sjollema on site. I direct the entire operation from this office, yes, but I do not keep my fingers on the names and work histories of all twelve hundred of those employees. You can take that question down to the

fifth floor, where you will find our personnel department. Do you have anything else you would like to ask me, Mr. Chaudri?"

"Yes, sir," the Pakistani said promptly, "I do. I didn't notice you at the Sinterklaas party yesterday. Why weren't you there?"

For the first time, the fight drained out of Hofstra's face, leaving him looking tired and old. "I have no children, Mr. Chaudri. There was no reason for me to be there."

Chaudri glanced quickly at the framed pictures on the wall. "No children?" he mused. "Then—"

"My son," said Hofstra, his voice hoarse. "Three weeks ago—twenty days ago—my son Pieter was playing on the beach, behind our house at al-Qarat. His mother was in a deck chair, knitting, and Pieter strayed away from her while she was absorbed in her work. When she noticed he had gone, she went to look for him. She found him in—in the water. He was dead, Mr. Chaudri. He had drowned."

Down on the fifth floor, as they were heading for the personnel office, Chaudri and Smit met Nicolaas Sjollema coming out of Purchasing. He looked hag-

gard and harried, but his drawn face lit up when he saw them. "I've been wondering how to reach you," he greeted them. "I thought you'd like to know about the people at the party. I checked with the compound hospital after I dropped you yesterday, and then again later on last night, and there were no serious injuries at all. Minor cuts from the flying glass, several of the adults who were closest to the windows required some stitches, a few of the children were pretty badly shaken up—but that was the worst of it. Everyone was home in time for dinner, *Godzijdank*."

"Indeed, that is good news," Chaudri grinned. "And you've saved us a trip out to Umm as Hawwak. We need to ask you a question about your crew, if you can spare us another minute."

"Yes, of course. They're sweating this morning, I can tell you that: I've got every laborer on the payroll out there cleaning up the islet today, loading rubble onto company barges and dumping it out in the gulf. If they can finish up by tonight, we'll be able to start right in on the reconstruction. That's why I'm in town now, trying to rush-order enough supplies and tools to get us rolling again." Sjollema seemed about to go on, but changed his

mind. "You don't need to hear about *my* problems," he said. "What was it you wanted to ask me?"

"Your crew," said Chaudri. "Could one of your men have placed the explosives that blew up the causeway during the afternoon of December fourth, during working hours, without being observed? He would have needed an hour or more for the job."

"No." Sjollema's answer was immediate and definite. "Impossible. I was on site all day, running our standard weekly inspection. I would have seen him."

"*U bent er absoluut zeker van?*" Roelof Smit put in.

The foreman answered in English for Chaudri's benefit: "Yes, lieutenant, I'm positive. Those charges were not set during working hours on Thursday. It had to have been done after we'd all left for the day, after six. I'd swear to that in court."

Nederbild's personnel manager was a severe woman in her mid-forties, dressed simply in a long black skirt and plain white blouse. She wore her hair frizzed in that strange style that never lasted more than a few months but was called—for some reason which was not clear to Mahboob

Chaudri—"permanent." A pair of eyeglasses was suspended around her neck by a thin silver chain; when the two policemen approached her, she put them on and eyed them carefully. There was a clipboard in her left hand.

"Gentlemen," she said. "I am Annemieke Stutje. I manage this office. You are the police. You want to know the names of Nederbild employees who have recently been fired." It was a statement, not a question, and it took them by surprise.

"You've just spoken with Mr. Hofstra?" Chaudri guessed.

"I have not."

"Then how did you—"

"How did I know what you want?" She put a forefinger to the bridge of her spectacles and pushed them a millimeter higher. "I am not a fool, gentlemen. Someone blew up the Qatar causeway yesterday afternoon. Perhaps it was a disgruntled former employee. I expected a representative of the police to call on me this morning, and here you are. I have already gone through my files for the information you need." She riffled through the pages on her clipboard and selected one of them, a half sheet of yellow flimsy. "Yes, I have it here. Within the last thirty days, only two of our employees have

been dismissed. On November 26th, a Korean laborer named Kim Lee Kwan was fired for attempting to steal sweet water from the Umm as Hawwak site."

"He was fired for stealing water?" Smit looked amazed.

Mevrouw Stutje adjusted her glasses again and peered at him. "You are new to Bahrain," she decided. "As I said, Mr. Kim was fired for stealing *sweet water*, which is pure spring water and the only water in this country that is fit to drink. It is used on site for mixing concrete, and Mr. Kim was caught trying to sneak a large jug of it back to his barracks. Sweet water is rather expensive here, and neither Nederbild BV nor the Bahraini government is prone to tolerate thievery: Mr. Kim's visa was immediately revoked, and he was on a plane to Seoul that same evening. I checked with the authorities at the Immigration and Passports Directorate earlier this morning, and he has not returned to Bahrain."

"And the second former employee?" Chaudri asked, scribbling furiously in his notebook.

"Ebezer Kwaja," the woman read, "Indian, employed as a clerk in our purchasing office until his dismissal four days ago, on December second. He is still in the emirate, working at the Central Market. He has a

cousin who sells fruits and vegetables there, and who took over sponsorship of Kwaja when we let the man go."

Chaudri looked up. Anne-mieke Stutje had omitted something, which seemed out of line with her usual brisk efficiency. "Why was Kwaja fired?" he asked.

She hugged her clipboard to her chest. "I don't know," she admitted, plainly troubled. "I *should* know, but I don't. No explanation was given. That is unusual for Nederbild BV."

"Whose decision was it to get rid of him?"

She pulled her spectacles down to the tip of her nose and appraised him silently over the rims. At last she spoke. "The order came down from the sixth floor," she said. "From Mr. Hofstra personally."

Manama's Central Market is a huge grey barn that sits just outside the western edge of the *suq* between the Naim Hospital and the Budaiya roundabout, within sight of the gulf. It is an ugly, windowless, characterless structure, whose metal walls trap the stifling heat all summer and the odors of meat and fish the year round. Shopping in the tangled maze of the old produce *suq* had been an adventure, but shopping at

the new Central Market was a chore.

When they entered the vast fruit and vegetable hall, Roelof Smit was overwhelmed by the enormity of it. It was as if a half dozen copies of Amsterdam's outdoor Albert Cuypmarkt had been laid side by side, with four drab walls and a high ceiling thrown up around them.

They were instantly surrounded by a gaggle of grinning Indian and Pakistani boys with wheelbarrows, who followed closely behind them, eager to carry their purchases for a few hundred fils.

But Smit and Chaudri walked down the seemingly endless rows of merchants—all males, from young boys in bluejeans to toothless old men in threadbare *thobes*, each sitting patiently on a tall stool, surrounded by his mountain of goods—without buying. They were not looking for tomatoes or eggplants or cabbages from Jordan, for cucumbers or lettuce or sweet peppers from Cyprus, for hot peppers or okra from India, for onions from Pakistan or cauliflower from Australia or potatoes from Egypt or garlic from Thailand, for bananas, pears, oranges, mangoes, guavas, kiwis, or African lemons the size of grapefruit. They were not looking for local produce, either, or for an infinity of burlap sacks

overflowing with peas, rice, raisins, flour, lentils, fava beans, pumpkin seeds, peanuts, pistachios, walnuts, almonds, chickpeas, red peppers, kidney beans, popcorn, or shredded coconut.

They were looking for Ebenezer Kwaja, and at last they found him. His cousin had allowed him a brief rest period, and he was sitting on a pale blue wooden bench along the north wall of the cavernous building, holding a small glass of steaming tea in both hands and watching the tide of buyers and sellers and wheelbarrow boys flow by.

"Mr. Ebenezer Kwaja?" Chaudri approached him.

The man eyed them curiously. He wore a satiny long-sleeved shirt in a loud floral pattern and navy blue slacks with grey pinstripes, tightly cut but flaring widely at the ankles. His deep brown forehead glistened with perspiration; his dark hair was styled but greasy.

"Most certainly," he said. "If you are looking for Mr. Ebenezer Kwaja, then I am most certainly the Mr. Ebenezer Kwaja you are looking for." He raised his glass of tea to his lips and blew on it, then lowered it untasted. "But why, I am asking myself, are you looking for Mr. Ebenezer Kwaja at all?"

Mahboob Chaudri was not a tall man, but standing over the seated Kwaja in his immaculate uniform, with his gun on his hip and his black-peaked cap and the military braid on his shoulder, he was an impressive figure. "Until recently," he said, "you were employed as a purchasing clerk at the Nederbild headquarters in the al-Khalifa Road. Four days ago, on December second, you were fired. Why?"

The Indian's jet black eyes gleamed. "Ah," he said, nodding his head sagely, "I am waiting for this very question to be asked. I am waiting every day to be asked why big man from the distant Netherlands is dismissing humble Mr. Ebenezer Kwaja from his trivial post. And now, at last, you have come." He paused for a sip of his tea, then looked up at them with a broad smile on his face. "Big man is dismissing Mr. Kwaja," he continued, "because Mr. Kwaja is knowing the truth. Yes, indeed, Mr. Kwaja is knowing *too much* truth."

"Too much truth about what?" Chaudri asked patiently, amused by the man's air of self-importance.

"Too much truth about his baby," Kwaja announced. "Too much truth about the—"

A muffled report sounded from somewhere behind them, and

the look of pride on the Indian's face warped into a mask of shock and pain. The glass of tea dropped from his hands and shattered on the concrete floor. He slumped back against the pale blue bench and clawed weakly at his chest, where a crimson blossom grew quickly among the flowers of his shirt.

"Water!" he gasped, and his clear black eyes were glassy now, and filled with tears. "Water!"

A minute later, someone came forward with a paper cup of water for him, but by then it was too late.

"*Jeetje mina!*" Roelof Smit wheezed huskily. "This is *hot!*"

They were sitting in a curtained-off booth at the Star of Paradise, a small Pakistani restaurant not far from the police barracks in Juffair. Mah-boob Chaudri was enjoying a large order of brains masala, but the Dutchman was having trouble with his bowl of beef rogan josh.

Smit filled a tumbler from the metal pitcher in the center of the table, and drained it in one noisy swallow. "I don't understand how you can eat this *spul*," he complained. "'S *Niet te geloven!*"

"I am glad you took my advice and ordered your dinner mildly seasoned," Chaudri

chuckled. "If you had gone ahead and asked for it spicy, I'm afraid I would have had to carry you back to your hotel. Here, let me pour you some more sweet water."

Smit took another long swallow and wiped the back of his hand across his bushy mustache. "Why *sweet water*?" he wanted to know. "It tastes like ordinary drinking water to me."

"The word 'Bahrain' is Arabic for 'two seas,'" Chaudri explained, "which is a reference to the gulf on the one hand, and the fresh-water springs that lie beneath the island on the other. Compared to the brackish salt water of the gulf, the spring water is sweet indeed."

"And expensive, like the Stutje woman said?"

"Oh, dearie me, yes. In fact, until the last round of increases in the price of oil, the service stations here in the emirate would wash the windows of your car with gasoline because that was cheaper than using sweet water." He ripped a large piece of bread from his bubbly round chapati and sopped up curried gravy from his plate. "You're not eating, lieutenant."

"I've had enough," Smit sighed, pushing his plate away and shaking his head sadly. "Anyway, I don't want to eat, I want to talk."

"You talk," mumbled Chaudri

around a mouthful of brains, "and I will eat for both of us."

The Dutchman settled back in his chair. "All right," he said, "I'll talk." He leaned forward, elbows on the table and chin cupped in his hands. "We're dealing here with four separate incidents: the drowning of Hendrik Hofstra's son, the dismissal of Ebezer Kwaja, the explosion at Umm as Hawwak, and Kwaja's murder. Each of these incidents gives rise to one or more questions. Was the death of Hofstra's child an accident, for example, as Hofstra himself told us—or was it something else? Was Kwaja really fired because of what he knew about the drowning—as *he* told us—or, if the boy's death was accidental, was there some other reason? Who blew up the Qatar causeway, and why? And, again, why and by whom was Ebezer Kwaja killed?"

Mahboob Chaudri nodded attentively, but his eyes never left his plate.

"Finally," Smit pressed on, "what relationships exist between these various events, if any? Was Kwaja fired because of what he knew about the drowning—and, more important, was he killed to keep him from passing that knowledge on to us? Did Kwaja take revenge for his dismissal by blowing up the bridge, or was the

explosion nothing at all to do with him? Were the blast and the drowning connected, or the blast and the murder—and, if so, how?"

Chaudri set down his knife and fork and poured himself a glass of water.

"We need to talk with Hofstra again," Smit suggested. "We need to know his explanation of the firing of Ebezer Kwaja, and why he sent us down to personnel instead of telling us about it himself, and where he was this afternoon when the Indian was shot. We need to know more about young Pieter's death, too—perhaps a conversation with Mrs. Hofstra would be worthwhile. And we need to find out who might have had a motive for setting those explosives. What do you think our next move should be, *mahsool?*"

Chaudri said nothing. He was staring, transfixed, at the glass of water in his hands.

"*Mahsool?*" said Smit, more loudly. "*Mahsool?*"

Startled, Chaudri looked up. "Oh, lieutenant," he said. "I'm sorry. I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"'About what?'" he repeated slowly. "How strange, lieutenant. That is exactly what I asked Ebezer Kwaja a moment before he was shot." He shook his head and took a small sip

of water. "I was thinking about a book I have been reading to practice my English, a book of the many adventures of your great European detective, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. 'You see, my dear Watson,' Mr. Holmes chastised his friend in one of the stories, 'but you do not *observe*.' And now I am chastising myself. Sometimes, my dear lieutenant, it seems that I *hear*—but I do not *listen*." A dazzling smile suddenly illuminated the nut-brown face. "But what was it you were asking me while my thoughts were far away in Victorian England?"

"Our next move," the Dutchman supplied. "What do you think our next move should be?"

"Aha!" said Mahboob Chaudri. "Our next move, I think, should be to order some khulfi for desert. It is a combination of vanilla ice cream and spaghetti and you will almost certainly hate it, but it is very typical of my country and I would like for you to try it."

"You're avoiding my question. I mean, what's our next move about the case?"

Chaudri beckoned to a white-jacketed waiter. "Ah, yes," he said indulgently, "the case. Well, my friend, there's nothing more we can do tonight. Tomorrow morning, when the university opens, we have a delivery to

make, and then we shall see what develops."

"We haven't got a forensics laboratory of our own yet,"

Chaudri explained as he steered the dusty blue Public Security jeep into the main parking lot of Gulf Polytechnic's Isa Town campus. "So when we need some lab work done, we bring it out here to one of the professors. Usually they are able to help us. *Insh'Allah*," he added automatically.

"That's not the first time I've heard that word," said Smit, swinging out of the vehicle and following Chaudri up a covered walkway towards the science department's modern building. "What does it mean?"

"*Insh'Allah*?" Chaudri smiled. "It is the Arab's constant prayer. 'Tomorrow it will be cooler, *insh'Allah*.' 'Your car will be fixed by this afternoon, *insh'Allah*.' 'Their marriage will be a happy one, *insh'Allah*.' It means: if Allah is willing. If Allah is willing, anything can happen."

"We might even solve this case," the Dutchman grimaced.

"*Insh'Allah*," laughed Mahboob Chaudri.

They found Professor Emad Rezk in his classroom, going over his notes for the day's first

lecture. Rezk, an Egyptian, had been with Gulf Polytechnic since the establishment of the school several years earlier. He was a talented chemist and had held a tenured position at the University of Cairo, but the offer of a substantially higher salary, a house, a car, and complete academic freedom had lured him—along with a large number of his colleagues—to the gulf. Though his thoughts were always perfectly organized, Rezk's exterior was usually dishevelled. His white lab coat showed acid burns in various places, his fingers were permanently yellowed from exposure to caustic chemicals.

"Mahboob Chaudri!" he exclaimed with delight as they edged between two rows of students' desks. "And a friend! How charming it is to see you both!"

Chaudri introduced Roelof Smit to the Egyptian, then pulled a small package wrapped in brown paper from his pocket. He unwrapped it carefully, to reveal the chunk of rubble he had taken away from Umm as Hawwak two days before. "How soon can you analyze this for me, professor? It is, I believe, quite important."

Rezk took the rock from Chaudri's hand and squinted at it. "Concrete," he said simply. "Is that soon enough for you,

my impatient friend?"

Chaudri rolled his eyes comically.

The professor pushed back the right sleeve of his lab coat and checked his watch. "I have a class in fifteen minutes," he said. "Second-year students. Hopeless cases, most of them, but they are trying. *Very* trying, much of the time, I'm afraid. They visit with me for one hour. When they leave, I will have time to apply myself to your intriguingly important mixture of cement, mineral aggregate, and dihydrogen oxide. What, if I may ask, am I to analyze it *for*?"

"If I'm right," said Mahboob Chaudri cryptically, "you will know it when you see it. May I phone you in, say, two hours?"

"Back to personnel?" Roelof Smit ventured, as they stepped off the elevator at the fifth floor of the tower in the al-Khalifa Road.

"Not this time," said Chaudri. "This time we are here to pay a call on the purchasing department, where the late Mr. Ebezer Kwaja was employed as a clerk."

The director of purchasing, Egbert Merkelijn, received them in the cubbyhole that had been partitioned off in a corner of the large workroom to provide him

with a private office. The space was barely big enough for his desk, two filing cabinets and the man himself: Merkelijn was no taller than Mahboob Chaudri, but he weighed at least two hundred fifty pounds. His tiny eyes were sunk deep in layers of fat; in spite of the air conditioning, his puffy face was flushed and damp. He seemed broader than the entrance to his cubicle, and Chaudri wondered if he was able to leave it at day's end, or if the partitions had been erected around him and had trapped him there.

There was nowhere for Chaudri and Smit to sit, so they stood in front of the desk and spoke down at him.

"Did you know Ebezer Kwaja?" Chaudri began.

"Yes, of course," the fat man rasped. "He worked here in my department."

"What can you tell us about him?"

"About Kwaja? He was quiet, he was respectful, he did his work efficiently."

"Then why was he fired?"

Merkelijn jutted out his lower lip and exhaled noisily through his nose. "I don't know. I had no complaints. But the order came down from the sixth floor: get rid of him."

"How long had he worked for you?" The question, this time, came from Roelof Smit.

"Ach, ja—a year, perhaps a bit longer. I'd have to look it up."

"What was his job?" asked Chaudri.

"He processed purchase orders. When an order was submitted from any of the other departments, it went to Kwaja. He countersigned it, and made out an authorization for disbursement of the necessary funds."

"Would it be possible to see some samples of his work?"

Merkelijn grunted and swung ponderously around to the file cabinet nearest him. He slid open a drawer, drew out a thick file folder, and laid it on his desk. "That contains all the purchase orders we have handled so far this quarter," he said, "in chronological order with the most recent on top. You'll need to go back a few days before you reach the last of the ones that went through Kwaja."

Chaudri leafed quickly through a dozen or more sheets, most of which had been filed that morning by Nicolaas Sjol-lema, then slowed down and began to examine each page individually. "There are three signature lines," he commented. "The first signature is apparently that of the person requesting a purchase, then underneath that is Kwaja, and then comes the first signature again."

The fat man nodded. "That's right, verifying that the monies requested have been paid out—either directly to the supplier or, in some cases, to the person submitting the request for transfer to the supplier—and that the merchandise ordered has been delivered."

Chaudri turned farther, then found a sheet that interested him and paused to make a note. He continued in this way through the entire pile, glancing at most of the order forms cursorily, stopping occasionally to jot down a line on his pad. When he finished, he straightened up the papers and handed the file back to Merkelijn. "Yes," he said, "this seems to be in order. May I use your telephone?"

Egbert Merkelijn waved a bloated hand at the instrument, and Chaudri picked up the receiver and dialed the number of Gulf Polytechnic. He asked the operator for Emad Rezk, and waited patiently as the call was switched through. "Professor Rezk?" he said at last. "This is Mahboob Chaudri speaking. Have you had a chance to examine that specimen I brought you? . . . Yes? . . . Yes? . . . Yes, that's exactly what I expected. And what would the consequences of that be? . . . Can you estimate how long that process would take? . . . About five years, you think, or perhaps a bit more or

less. . . . Yes, I see. Very well then, professor, I thank you for your time. . . . No, no, thank you." He cradled the phone.

"Well?" said Smit, recognizing the grim satisfaction etched across Chaudri's face. "What did he tell you?"

"He told me why the causeway had to be destroyed, and why Ebezer Kwaja had to be silenced," Mahboob Chaudri replied. "And he told me who it was who committed both of those crimes."

Hendrik Hofstra and Nicolaas Sjollema were huddled over Hofstra's model of the causeway when Chaudri and Smit walked into the office without knocking.

The director was furious. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "This is a private office, Mr. Chaudri. You can't just barge in here unannounced like that!"

"*Rustig aan*, Dirck," Sjollema soothed him. "They wouldn't have done it if it weren't urgent. Would you like me to leave, officer?"

"I'd rather you stayed," said Chaudri. "What I have to say concerns you, too. Sit down, gentlemen—this may take some time."

Hofstra growled under his breath, but he did not argue. The four men settled them-

selves into comfortable arm-chairs, and the Dutchmen turned expectantly to Chaudri.

"First," he began, "a question. Mr. Hofstra, you personally ordered the dismissal of Ebezer Kwaja from your purchasing department on December second, just under a week ago. Why did you issue that order?"

"I—" The director glanced quickly at Nicolaas Sjollema, then turned back to Chaudri. "My reasons have no bearing on your investigation," he said gruffly.

"Your reasons, if you will excuse my saying so, do not *exist*," Chaudri corrected him. "You gave the order to get rid of Kwaja, true, but I suggest that you did so at the instigation of someone else. Kwaja knew who was truly responsible for his dismissal: the 'big man,' he told us, 'from the distant Netherlands.' He said that the big man had fired him because he—Kwaja—knew too much about the big man's baby. We assumed that he was speaking figuratively when he said the words 'big man,' and that he was speaking literally when he referred to the big man's baby: the big man, we thought, was the big boss—you, Mr. Hofstra—and the baby was your son Pieter."

"My son was not a baby,"

Hofstra objected. "He was six years old, almost seven."

"Exactly. Ebezer Kwaja was speaking *figuratively* when he used the word 'baby.' He was not referring to the death of your child. But he spoke *literally* when he said that a 'big man' had fired him. And you, Mr. Hofstra, are hardly big.

"Who, then, was the big man who convinced you to dismiss Ebezer Kwaja, for reasons that were clear to the Indian if not to you? Who was the big man whose 'baby' Kwaja knew too much about? Who was the big man who killed him in order to keep him from telling us what he knew?" Chaudri paused for a moment, observing Hofstra closely. Then he went on: "You do not look surprised, Mr. Hofstra, to hear that Ebezer Kwaja is dead."

The director's aggressiveness seemed to have melted away from him, leaving him tentative, confused. "No," he said, "I—I'm not surprised. Nick told me, shortly before you burst in here."

"Ah," Chaudri nodded, "now that is very curious. Because Kwaja's murder has not been mentioned on the radio news, or on television, or in this morning's paper. Which leads me to wonder, Mr. Sjollema, how you could possibly have known about the killing? Unless, of course,

you were there at the Central Market when it happened. Unless, in fact, you murdered Ebezer Kwaja yourself."

Nicolaas Sjollema eyed him narrowly. "You're crazy," he said. "I barely knew the man. What possible reason could I have had for shooting him?"

"Shooting him, Mr. Sjollema? Oh, dearie me, and I am *quite* certain I never mentioned that Mr. Kwaja had been shot. 'Killed,' I said, and 'murdered,' but 'never shot.'"

"Nick," Hendrik Hofstra said angrily, "what is all this? What's he trying to say?"

"I am *not trying* to say anything, sir," Chaudri told him. "I am *saying* that your foreman, Nicolaas Sjollema, shot and killed Ebezer Kwaja at the Central Market early yesterday afternoon."

"But why, dammit? *Why?*"

Chaudri sighed. "Kwaja told us that as well, though I am afraid we didn't understand him at first. He said that he had been fired because he knew too much. 'About what?' I asked him. 'About his baby,' he replied, speaking figuratively. 'About the—' And then the shot was fired, and he gasped the word 'water' twice, and died. We thought that, in his final moments, he was asking for something to drink. He was not. He was finishing his sentence.

'About the water,' he was saying. He was fired because he knew too much about the water."

"I still don't understand," said Roelof Smit. "What *about* the water?"

Chaudri ticked the points off on his fingers. "The Qatar causeway is made of concrete. Concrete is mixed with water, pure water—in Bahrain, with *sweet* water. Nicolaas Sjollema needed money—or wanted money—and he saw a way to amass quite a bit of it. He ordered sweet water for the project, ordered it frequently and in large quantities—I have the dates and amounts right here." He patted the pocket of his uniform shirt. "But he built the Umm as Hawwak section of the bridge with ordinary tap water, and kept the money he was to have paid out for the sweet water for himself."

Sjollema sat there, impassive, motionless, silent.

"Then things began to go wrong. A few weeks ago, a Korean laborer named Kim Lee Kwan stole a jug of Mr. Sjollema's tap water from the site, but Mr. Sjollema caught him in the act. Perhaps Kim tasted the water, and realized that there was a swindle going on. Perhaps he never had the chance: Mr. Sjollema had him on a flight out of Bahrain that very same day. For a while, he must

have felt safe again. Then Ebezer Kwaja became suspicious. The Indian was not under Mr. Sjollema's supervision, so Mr. Sjollema could not get rid of him directly, but he went to you, Mr. Hofstra, with some vague, trumped-up story—"

"He said he'd heard the man was working out a method of siphoning money away from the company." Hofstra filled in the details dully. "He had no evidence, so I couldn't come out and make a direct accusation. But since it was Nick, I—I believed him. And I had personnel let him—Kwaja—go."

Chaudri drew a breath and went on. "Mr. Sjollema expected that the Indian would be deported, as was Kim Lee Kwan. He hadn't counted on Kwaja's having a cousin here who would take over sponsorship of his visa. And, meanwhile, he realized that the Umm as Hawwak section of the bridge would have to be destroyed. Made of concrete mixed with brackish tap water, he knew that it would last only a few years, perhaps half a decade. Then it would collapse—there would probably be loss of life, there would *certainly* be an investigation, and the truth would be discovered. No, it was better to sneak back out to the islet late at night on the fourth of December, after work, and to set the charges

that would rip the structure apart on Sinterklaas, while Sjollema himself was in full view of dozens of impeccable witnesses."

At last the accused man stirred.

"You have no proof," he said. His voice was flat, emotionless.

"I have your signatures on the purchase orders," Chaudri replied, "requesting the purchase of thousands of liters of sweet water. And I have Ebezer Kwaja's signatures, authorizing the monies to be paid to you, rather than directly to a supplier. Which, of course, is why you finally decided that you had to kill him: so he would never reveal what he suspected about your bridge—your 'baby'—and about your phony purchase of sweet water. Then I have your signatures again, confirming that the sweet water Nederbild paid for was in fact delivered."

"It *was* delivered," Sjollema snarled. "I ordered sweet water, I paid for sweet water, I *got* sweet water, and I built that roadbed with nothing but pure sweet water. And you can't prove otherwise, Mr. Chaudri: after the explosion, I had my crew dump every last bit of rubble so far out to sea that you'll *never* be able to find it."

"A clever move," Chaudri ad-

mitted. "But what you do not know, my clever Mr. Sjollema, is that I happened to pick up a small piece of concrete debris when I was out at Umm as Hawwak that day, after you and Lieutenant Smit went back to the fishing dhow. I had it analyzed this morning. And according to that analysis—"

But there was no need for Chaudri to continue. Nicolaas Sjollema put his head in his hands and began to sob.

At Roelof Smit's insistence, they had dinner that night at Mansouri Mansions, where it was possible to eat a Western meal and drink large mugs of foaming Dutch beer.

"So the analysis showed that the concrete *had* been mixed with tap water," Smit said, wiping suds from his bushy walrus mustache contentedly, "which was enough to prove Sjollema a crook even without his confession. But there's one thing I still don't understand. Right after the explosion, when we rushed out of the messhall to the beach, Nicolaas Sjollema was standing there crying, and he was crying real tears. Was

he so upset about the destruction of his bridge, even though he'd blown it up himself?"

Chaudri shook his head. "Mr. Sjollema stopped caring about the causeway the day he began building it with worthless concrete. It was not his baby when he killed it, not any more."

"Then why the tears?" Smit frowned.

Chaudri picked up his hamburger and bit into it hungrily. "You know quite a lot about police work, lieutenant," he said, "but you must learn to pay more attention to human beings. Mr. Sjollema planned the blast for a day when no one would be working out at Umm as Hawwak, a day when he could devastate the bridge without hurting any people. Yet he needed to ensure that the contaminated section of the structure would be completely destroyed, so he used a very large amount of explosive. Much more, as it turned out, than was needed."

"You mean—?" Smit's face cleared.

"The children," Mahboob Chaudri nodded. "Sinterklaas cried because he hadn't meant to hurt the children."

UNSOLVED

by C. R. Wylie, Jr.

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.

In an old and much worn book of travels, dating from the times when a man who had journeyed beyond the hills that guarded his own village was an object of awe to his fellows, I once came upon a description of a remarkable city of the east. According to the narrator, this city was built upon ten islands connected in the following manner. Five bridges led from the islands to the mainland. Moreover, four of the islands had four bridges leading from them, three of the islands had three bridges leading from them, two of the islands had two bridges leading from them, and one island could be reached by only one bridge.

No doubt in its time this description had provided many simple folk with a vicarious sense of exploration and adventure. In fact, I read it with keen interest until suddenly in a moment of unwonted penetration I perceived that the whole thing was a hoax, and that no such city could exist anywhere in this or in any other world.

What is the fallacy that stamps this description as impossible?

See page 95 for the solution to the Mid-December puzzle.

Taken from 101 Puzzles in Thought & Logic by C. R. Wylie, Jr. Copyright © 1957 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

The Old Shell Game

by Al Kuhfeld



Potiphar Pugh and the Fossil Man bent over the table, the one in the back, where the dirty work was done.

"Pete," the Fossil Man said, "you're used to plaster. Open up the package, some of it spills on the table. Measure it out, more spills. Stir it up and pour it, and you have a bowl to clean.

"Now here," he continued, "we have a whole nother kettle

of fish." He held up a small plastic cup, like a pudding cup, and peeled the foil cover back. It was half full of a tan powder.

"Each cup is sealed, so you don't have to worry about its going bad. Open it, pour water in up to this line, and give it a few stirs with a popsicle stick. I include the stick in the package. You don't need a separate catalyst."

Illustration by George Thompson

Potiphar watched with interest as the Fossil Man poured the creamy substance into a small rubber mold. "How fast does it set up?" he asked.

"You can handle it in four minutes," the Fossil Man replied, nonchalantly dumping the rest of the cupful on to the table. It looked quite at home among the earlier marks of plaster and paint, soldering irons and cutting knives. Potiphar winced, but only a little; this table was for messes, after all.

"You see, it's mostly powdered stone, mixed in with polymers that are activated by water. Solid as a rock after about ten minutes; and I defy you to tell it from the real thing. Comes in limestone and shale, and you can tint it with acrylic paints for a better color match. I'm working on sandstone, but so far it's not cooperating."

He glanced at his watch and picked up the rubber mold. He worked it briefly, and a small trilobite popped out. "There, Pete, what did I tell you? There's not one rockhound in ten could tell it from a real fossil without turning it over to see the mold opening.

"And here's a bonus: Most synthetic rock, you need something Godawful like toluene for cleanup. Mineral spirits wipe up my formulation like a

charm." He poured paint thinner on a cloth and attacked the smear of "rock" on the table. And while the charm obviously involved quite a bit of elbow grease, in two minutes the rock was gone while the earlier plaster stains remained.

Potiphar was turning the freshly minted trilobite over and over, examining it closely. "Fred, that is amazing," he said. "The kids that come through the Touch and Feel room could use those little cups with no trouble. And that's one of the best rubber molds I've seen. What all do you have?"

"Oh, another trilobite; a brachiopod, a small ammonite, a crinoid, several different fish skeletons—the crowd pleasers."

Potiphar stood. "You've sold me," he said. "I'll take two sets of the molds, and a gross each of the limestone and the shale mixing cups. Do you have larger quantities of the rock mix? I'm working on an exhibit."

"Sure do," the Fossil Man replied as they went to the door. "There's a fifty pound sack of the limestone mix in the back of the jeep. It's been opened and I've used some—I'll let you have it half-price."

The jeep in front of the museum was battered with hard use. Carefully locked in a tool-rack were pickaxes, shovels, mattocks. Water and gasoline cans were bolted in carriers. A

sign painted on the door proclaimed "Fred Wilson Fossil Expedition." Wilson himself wore khaki and engineer boots, topped by a bushranger hat almost as battered as the jeep. A cynical observer might, perhaps, snort at such theatricality.

They were theatrical. Fred Wilson was the Fossil Man, and don't you forget it. And yet—Wilson's face was an outdoorsman's face. There was reality behind the facade. Potiphar was a naturalist, well able to recognize another citizen of the wilderness.

Wilson opened a weather-tight storage chest and handed Potiphar two large cases of rock-powder cups; then added a small box of rubber molds. As he hoisted the fifty-pound sack onto his shoulder, a yellow bus turned into the drive, resounding of children.

"Fred, could you take that sack back to the workroom, and then have Sally issue you a check for this stuff? I want to try these molds out, and here are just the customers. Digger Dan's out today, so I'm holding down the Touch and Feel Room." And Potiphar hurried into the museum.

An hour later the room was still surprisingly clean, with only a scatter of mixing cups. The

kids were reassembling into traveling order. In the back a fifth-grade shyster was bargaining his way to a complete set of the fossil replicas they'd just made; but most of the children had put them away at their teacher's request. Chattering and squealing, they headed out for the bus.

At the door, Mrs. Anderson spotted the shyster's bulging pockets, saw a trilobite peeking out. (She'd been a junior high library monitor for fifteen years when Potiphar hired her away from the school system. Nothing got by her.)

She swelled to twice life-size, and swept out to intercept the malefactor. "It's okay, Mrs. Anderson," Potiphar called out. "He made them himself. One of them, anyhow. . . . Could you show them to Mrs. Anderson, Samuel?"

Samuel dug in his pockets, and laid his treasures in a neat line on Mrs. Anderson's desk. She clucked and exclaimed over them. "My word, you had me fooled! I thought for sure you were walking off with some of the real fossils we keep in the back!" Samuel grinned and blushed at the praise, and in relief at the close escape; then was snagged and hustled off by the teacher. The bus doors accordioned shut, and it rolled onto the highway with children waving out the windows at Po-

tiphar and Mrs. Anderson as they stood in the drive.

"Went real well," Potiphar said. "The Fossil Man sold me some new molds, and I was trying them out. I think it'll be a good activity to have, kids making their own fossils. We'll see how Digger Dan likes the idea—he's the one who'll have to live with it."

Potiphar turned, and the Fossil Man was behind him. "Borrowed the office phone while I was in there," Wilson said. "I checked with the freight company, and I've got some nice Green River Formation fossils arriving late Friday. I have to be in Chicago Monday, but if we could get together Saturday I could let you have a look."

"Also, I've got a chunk of mammoth tusk knocking around; not worth exhibiting, but the kids would love it. Buy something, save me from having to haul it to Chicago, and I could throw in the tusk."

"I'll be by at ten on Saturday," he said as he got into his jeep and roared off, not giving Potiphar a chance to say no.

"That's Fred Wilson all over," said Mrs. Anderson sympathetically. "I hope you haven't got much planned for Saturday."

The museum was quiet and empty. Late-afternoon sun slanted in as Potiphar made his accus-

tomed rounds: checking windows, turning off lights, making sure doors were locked. He loved this routine, silently moving among his treasures. A patch of white against the far wall: a snow goose mounted on a hummock, painted prairie marsh fading into the distance behind it. And ahead was the flickering blue underwater light of the largemouth bass diorama. (How long had it taken to get that light just right?)

He went through the archway into the next room, and his heart skipped a beat at the hulking shadow poised to lunge at him. That damned wild boar! he thought. No matter how many times he saw it, it startled him. The taxidermist had done a wonderful and fearsome job.

Something was wrong. In the room beyond, the door to the "Fossil Treasures" display case was slightly ajar. Potiphar covered the distance in three strides.

The golden pyrite sand dollars were still there; the polished slab of turritella-stone and the huge agate disk of petrified wood remained. But the centerpiece of the display—the ammonite shell, almost a foot across and petrified into shining opal, polished into iridescent beauty, was gone! His favorite exhibit!

What had happened to the alarm? He bent for a closer

look. A tiny bar magnet lay upon the magnetic switch, keeping it from noting the door's opening. He ran to the front door, locked the deadbolt—now anyone in the museum would stay there. There was no way out of the building without a key.

He went to the alarm console, reset the motion detectors, and waited anxiously. If anybody was in the museum, he wasn't moving. Potiphar set out to check the museum for—visitors.

And found none.

He checked every room. He checked the secret places all museums have, and the public places, and he locked the doors behind him as he went. There was nobody in the men's room, and there was nobody in the women's. (He didn't even hesitate.)

The alarm system had recorded his progress faithfully; it still worked. There was one last place to check.

Whenever something disappears in a museum frequented by children, the staff search the bushes by the exit. Sometimes children get carried away playing cops-and-robbers, but the game plan doesn't go beyond that. Once they've stolen something, been the bad man, they dispose of the evidence at the first possible opportunity. That's usually in the bushes just outside.

Potiphar searched, and found the stuffed robin from the "City Soil" exhibit. It had been missing for weeks, and was in dreadful shape. There were cigarette butts and gum wrappers. There was no fossil.

He searched the bushes around the side of the house, and the back, and the far side. Then he began to search the perimeter of the grounds. Pheasant's nest back in the bushes; rabbit trail; a family of skunks had been by, leaving a pattering of tiny footprints in a patch of mud from last night's rain. No traces on the only passable trail down the bluff at the rear; and suddenly he fetched up at the side of the highway.

He grabbed himself by the cerebral scruff of his neck, and shook. "Stop stewing around, and call the cops," he told himself. And he did.

Soon two police cars pulled up and uniformed men got out, one from each car. Potiphar explained the problem, and the museum's security arrangements. One began a close inspection of the yard, while the other went indoors with Potiphar to examine the alarms and the display case. They quickly decided the job needed a detective, equipped with fingerprint kit, camera, and specialized training.

Captain Neill wore plainclothes and carried a toolkit of

medium size. He huddled briefly with the patrolmen, then spoke with Potiphar for some while, concentrating on the security precautions normally used by the museum. Finally he asked the obvious question: "Just why would anybody want to steal a fossil, Mr. Pugh?"

"Most fossils only a collector would want. But this one was different." Potiphar pointed to the case next to "Fossil Treasures," and a spiraling shell perhaps the size of a grapefruit.

"The pearly nautilus," he said. "Many people consider it to be the most beautiful shell on earth. The ammonites looked a lot like it. But this ammonite lived about two hundred million years ago.

"A lot can happen to a fossil in that time. Sometimes the original material is replaced by minerals: that's how you get petrified wood. The original shell of the ammonite dissolved and was replaced by opal. That isn't uncommon—but in this case, it was gem-quality opal.

"We had it polished, and we built a room's worth of exhibits around it. We have it insured for fifty thousand dollars; God only knows how much it could be sold for. And I can easily think of several people who would buy it, no questions asked."

"Oh," said Neill. He held up his hands, fingertips touching,

to make a ball in the air. "An opal jewel, this big?"

"Bigger."

"Now that I know why they stole it, I got just one question. How did they sneak it out the door?"

"That's driving me up the wall," agreed Potiphar. "Nobody gets anything past Mrs. Anderson. The alarm system shows the emergency doors haven't been opened all day—and unlike this display, the doors are steel-covered. That would block any outside magnets from affecting the magnetic switches. Last year we painted all the ground-floor windows shut when we finally got the air conditioning."

Neill chuckled. "More secure than locking them."

He frowned. "You said Mrs. Anderson was at her desk by the door all day; but nobody is at their desk *all* day. Our thief may simply have waited until she was away for a minute, and gotten it out then.

"In any case, I can't do much with a floor that has been walked on all day by hundreds of people. Let's test the alarm system sensors, and then I'll go over the inside of the display case for fingerprints."

The sensors all worked, and the only prints inside the case belonged to Potiphar. Neill shrugged, and repacked his case. "We'll put out a bulletin—it'll

be hard to sell something that spectacular, and if the thief's not a professional we could get him that way. Would you have a picture of the missing fossil?"

Potiphar got several postcards from the souvenir rack. "Faith, that's pretty!" said Neill; and Potiphar murmured agreement.

Neill left, promising to keep the museum informed of developments. Potiphar was alone in the darkened halls.

He set the alarms and let himself out, then crossed the courtyard to the carriage house where he lived. The entire property had once been his ancestral home; but he was the last of his line. And while he had an independent income, the mere well-to-do can no longer afford Stately Homes.

As a naturalist, he had known the Wilderness Foundation was looking for a home for the museum they hoped to build. He had sold the house to them, with a five-year contract for himself as curator thrown in, and had proceeded to build a fine small museum. The mansion was—if anything—more completely his now than it had been when he was living there. And it had been violated.

Potiphar ate a tasteless meal from an aluminum tray, not noticing it. His mind scurried about, retracing his steps as he searched the museum and

grounds; and he found no more in memory than he had in person.

He turned on the television for distraction. That proved to be a terrible idea: the evening movie was a museum-heist story. Potiphar turned it off and went to bed, slipping into an uneasy slumber filled with dreams of cat-burglars suspended like spiders from ropes to the skylights his museum had somehow acquired.

The next day, Potiphar prowled the halls of the museum, startling the occasional visitor as he popped out of unsuspected doors. The evening before, he'd been looking for a thief; today, he was looking for clues.

Mrs. Anderson sat at her desk by the door, watching even more carefully than usual. Sally, in the office, went through draft after draft of a report to the Foundation board.

The only person having a normal day was Digger Dan in the Touch and Feel Room. It was Friday, and that meant kids. Normally they felt the beaver pelt, held box turtles from the aquarium, wore the pheasant-skin as a hat, and pawed through a small collection of fossils and shells. Today, Dan had them making fossils in his little workshop. They loved it.

During a break in the action, Dan caught Potiphar as he emerged from a walkway hidden between the beaver diorama and the birds' eggs. "Pete, the kids love the stuff you got for the Room yesterday, especially those fossil molds. We've gone through half a case of that fake rock already."

"Good," said Potiphar, pleased. "But we can't afford to let them make fossils for free after today. Talk with the teachers, Dan, and see if you can't work this into a course the schools would be willing to pay for."

A chatter of high voices rose as the front door opened, and Dan made a dash for his sanctum. Potiphar shook his head, grateful *somebody* could behave normally. Today he could only think of his missing shell. Tomorrow, maybe . . . yeah, that would be Fred Wilson with some fresh fossils. The Show Must Go On.

Potiphar crossed the room and unlocked a hinged section of wall. He stepped through the opening, flashlight in hand, and pulled the wall closed behind him.

He was standing in a narrow passage with rough-framed irregular walls on either side: the backs of exhibits. From the right, he heard young voices exclaiming over the wild boar that had startled him so, just

before this began. His flashlight showed footprints in the dust before him, leading into the dark; a clue! He followed them, to where they formed a scuffed spot behind the recessed light fixture. He cursed softly; he'd made those prints himself, a month ago, when he changed the bulbs. Another dead end.

Potiphar sat, feet on his desk, lost in a brown study. He'd gone over the museum, searched every hidden nook and cranny, and there were no clues to be found. The opal ammonite had vanished without a trace.

How could anybody have gotten it past Mrs. Anderson? He tried to imagine a seventh-grader, staggering under the burden of a thirty-five-pound fossil, evading her x-ray stare. For a minute he pictured bird-like Mrs. Anderson carrying it out, but that was even more improbable. Formidable though she was, she was seventy; and she operated on force of personality, not physical strength.

Kids were out, Mrs. Anderson was out. Who else was there? Dan? The Fossil Man? A teacher? He frowned. And how? It might be possible to just walk out the door with it—but that would take more luck, timing, and gall than most people could muster.

Sally knocked, and came in

with a sheaf of papers. "I've tried writing a letter to the board," she said. "How's this?"

"On Thursday, May 24, the Wildlife Museum was faced with the most serious crisis in its existence to date, when its magnificent and priceless opal shell was deftly stolen under the very nose of . . ."

Potiphar raised his open hand with a wry laugh. "Sally, I've been acting as if this is our most serious crisis, so I can't blame you for saying so, but it's not. What about the time the pipes burst in the collections storage room? Or that lawsuit over the Harris accession?"

Sally blushed. She wanted to be a writer—Potiphar had read a number of her efforts—and she had a weakness for hyperbole.

"Try to mellow it out a bit, hey? We don't want to stampede the board, and above all we want to watch what ideas we put in their heads. Just be very careful not to say anything beyond what's there to be said . . ."

Potiphar's feet crashed to the floor, and he sat bolt upright. "Beyond what's there!" he cried, and was out of his office like a shot.

"Dan!" he shouted, bursting into the Touch and Feel Room, setting off shrieks among startled fourth-graders. "You said the kids liked the things I'd gotten for your room, *especially* the

fossil molds. But the molds are the *only* thing I got!"

"Then where did that fat limestone ammonite come from, over on the fossil table?" Dan said, pointing. "I knew you saw Fred Wilson yesterday, so I figured you got it from him."

Potiphar whirled, stared, then with a glad "aha!" snatched up the ammonite and headed for his workshop at a run. Fifteen minutes and a pint of mineral spirits later, the thin layer of imitation limestone was gone and the opal ammonite lay revealed to view.

Potiphar stamped into his office, temporarily more a force of nature than curator. "Hold the letter, Sally; things have changed!" he called out as he dialed Captain Neill's number.

“**T**he way I see it, Fred Wilson knew what that fossil was worth,” he told the detective an hour later as the puzzled Neill looked at the glowing shell. “There he was, alone in the museum with the ammonite and an open sack of imitation limestone. He knew I would be busy with the kids for at least twenty minutes, so he popped the case open, took the shell back to my shop, and gave it a quick coat of stone to make it look like an ordinary fossil.

“Then, when I was out seeing

the kids off, he nipped into the Touch and Feel Room and put it on the fossil table. He figured nobody would notice it there."

"If he had magnets with him, he might have been planning this for some time," Captain Neill noted.

"Yes," said Potiphar, "and was just waiting for his chance. So let's go pick him up."

"Well, we've got a problem with that. You see, he didn't steal your ammonite. There it is, on your desk. And I don't think we could prove attempted theft."

Potiphar fumed. "But he's a crook! He's coming back tomorrow—Saturday, when Mrs. Anderson isn't at the door—to steal it. What do you want me to do, let him take it? What if he gets away?" He ran a loving finger over his prize. "No. This is too precious to risk."

Neill sighed. "Yeah, I understand. Maybe we'll catch him next time."

A crafty smile slowly spread across Potiphar's face. "Still, it would be a shame to disappoint him," he said.

Potiphar watched from his office window as Fred Wilson loaded crates into the jeep. The museum now owned several new Cretaceous fishes (if the word "new" can be applied to something from the age of dinosaurs) and

there was an interesting if battered piece of mammoth tusk in the Touch and Feel Room.

And after Fred Wilson had taken away the crate he'd brought the tusk in, a large limestone ammonite fossil was gone.

The jeep pulled out onto Highway 13, headed west. "He's off the museum property," Potiphar thought, and spoke into the transceiver Captain Neill had given him.

Two police cars shot from side streets, neatly boxing the jeep between them. Potiphar ran out the door and reached Wilson just in time to hear Neill finish reading him his rights.

Wilson was cool, no denying it. When they opened up the crate, he shrugged. "Of course I've got fossils in the jeep! I'm the Fossil Man. Open up the other crates, and you'll find more."

"You stole my ammonite!" Potiphar growled between clenched teeth. He snatched it from the case, and thrust it in Wilson's face.

"Nonsense!" Wilson replied reasonably. "Your ammonite is opalized. Mine is perfectly ordinary limestone."

Potiphar snarled as if enraged, and moved to grab Wilson. Neill blocked him; Potiphar lost his footing. His arms waved, seeking balance, and the fossil flew into the air.

"Jesus Christ!" Wilson screamed, diving to catch it. "Don't you know how delicate opal is?"

The fossil hit the road, and a small chunk broke off.

Potiphar and Captain Neill shook hands, while Wilson looked unbelievably at the loose, drab piece of stone.

"I believe that counts as a confession. And he said it spontaneously, so it should be admissible," Neill said.

"You were expecting opal all over the road, weren't you?" Potiphar said icily. "Let's try it again, shall we?"

He hurled the ammonite to the pavement with all his strength. It burst into a thousand pieces. A plastic zip-loc bag was partially embedded in one of the larger chunks.

Potiphar picked up the chunk with the bag and flipped the plastic with his finger directly in front of Wilson's nose. It contained a postcard of the opal ammonite, Potiphar's business

card, and several large bills.

"See that?" he asked. "Two hundred fifty dollars makes it a felony. You may not have stolen the opal, but by God, you're not getting out of this one on a technicality!"

Potiphar looked the Fossil Man in the eye. "You aren't the only one who knows how to make rubber molds," he said. "You're looking at the rest of your sack of limestone powder, down there around your feet."

"Do business with me for years, then stab me in the back? I wish they still had the old rockpile, so the other jailbirds could see a real professional rockhound at work!"

Potiphar watched as the police car bore Fred Wilson into the distance. "Damn," he said softly to himself. "The kids really loved making those fossils."

"I hope I can find another supplier for that special rock, now that the Fossil Man is out of business."

SOLUTION TO THE MID-DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Mr. Yellow is a White.

FICTION

Kind, Decent, Pleasantly Plump

by Lawrence
Doorley

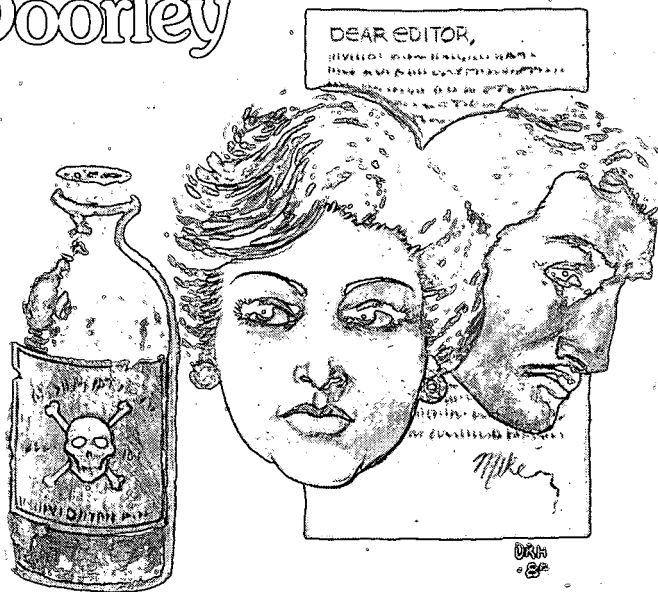


Illustration by Daniel R. Horne

Before Mildred Zebbley met Harry Bates, she was a kind, decent, pleasantly plump bundle of curves and perfume, the last person one would suspect of agreeing to murder anyone. Harry, wonderful, gorgeous, divine Harry, changed her. In more ways than one.

Dear Diary, Mildred's long-time confidante—they had shared a thousand platinum rinses and at least two broken hearts—first learned of Harry on a Sunday morning in October, two years back. While Harry was off checking out of the motel, Mildred—enthralled, beatified, beside herself—gurgled to Dear Diary:

"I have met my heavenly knight; my wonderful, gorgeous, divine Harry Bates. He is six feet three; he weighs a scrumptious one hundred and eighty-six pounds, every single ounce as perfect as God ever made. He has coal black hair, the sexiest bushy mustache you ever saw. His eyes are a lovely brown, his teeth are pearly white, and he has a dimple in his strong, manly chin. He is going to stay in Locust Grove and open a health spa. I am in seventh heaven, floating on air." (Ha, sneered Dear Diary, visualizing one hundred sixty-two pounds of chubbiness—or was it one seventy-two, you couldn't

believe her about her weight—floating over Locust Grove. Ha.) "I am bursting with love... this time it's forever and ever and ever... till the end of time... oh bliss, oh joy, oh love..."

Oh boy, groaned Dear Diary, here we go again; you poor chubby nitwit, when will you learn?

Dear Diary had a good point. By now Mildred should have known better. For on the October evening (the huge harvest moon might have had something to do with it) that Harry Bates—thirty-six, probably closer to forty-four, tall, dark, sinewy, even his mustache had muscles—appeared through the smoky murk of the Wayward Tavern, Mildred Zebbley was forty-nine, no spring chicken. She looked no more than forty, forty-two. She was holding on thirty-eight. Pleasantly plump, as they say, she had only one or two little wrinkles. She had soft blue eyes and nice teeth, and her blonde hair, dyed, was always perfectly coiffed, an impressive advertisement for her own beauty salon, Mildred's, a three-chair establishment that catered to the more affluent ladies of Locust Grove.

And since Mildred's was a money-maker, she was able to dress tastefully, adroitly ac-

neral expenses . . . you know (the rat; Pa was alive and frisky in Florida, the only widower on Lawrence Welk Lane of the Golden Age Mobile Home Park, where dwelt a dozen scheming widows).

Oh, you wonderful, dear boy, a perfect son, cooed Mildred. Fear not, I will finance the spa, be a silent partner. We will share the profits, fifty-fifty.

Harry almost choked. Recovering, he managed to stutter that he could buy that.

So Mildred cashed in thirty-five thousand dollars' worth of certificates of deposit, the thirty-five thousand saved since the second husband, a handsome, good-for-nothing, philandering spendthrift had departed eight years ago, and The Body Beautiful opened on January fifth.

Alas . . . the three spas in Crescent City, learning of the forthcoming competition, banded together, reduced rates, put on a whirlwind advertising campaign, and signed up three hundred new customers from Locust Grove, the contracts to run for a year. The Body Beautiful, woefully undernourished financially, required a seventy-five hundred dollar transfusion as early as April (Mildred took out a second mortgage on the condo), and by late summer the prognosis was grim.

But before Alas there was

Ecstasy Beyond Belief, which was the way Mildred described it to Dear Diary around Christmas, three months after Lady Luck had maliciously broken Harry's fan belt just to see if forty-nine-year-old Mildred had learned her lesson.

"Dear Diary," rhapsodized Mildred, "these have been weeks of Ecstasy Beyond Belief. Harry is out of this world. Words fail me. I have never been happier . . . except . . . well . . . it's just a little thing. . . ." (Come on, come on, what is it? Damn it, quit stalling.) "Well . . . I guess you're entitled to know . . . well . . . it's just that—now, it's for my own good—I had gotten a little overweight." (A little? how about forty-five pounds overweight?) "... Well . . . Harry says . . . and Harry is always right . . . he says that people seeing us together and knowing he was about to open a health spa . . . well, it would look funny. Since October I have lost eighteen pounds and am down to ~~—~~ ~~—~~ (Foul, foul, foul, shrieked Dear Diary, twitching its pretty pink tassel angrily. What is that? One forty-eight or one fifty-six? Cheater!) "Of course, and don't you ever say I said it, well . . . it isn't easy, but it's a small concession to make for . . . for paradise." (Did you ever see the like?

moaned Dear Diary in acute disgust. Forty-nine years old—she can fool some of the people but not me—and still acting like a giddy teenager . . . the poor dear nincompoop.)

Mildred's seventy-four-year-old Uncle Mike—Michael Patrick Hannigan—an eccentric reprobate who had led a less than exemplary life (wine, women, gambling) wobbled center stage in late March, about the time Ecstasy Beyond Belief was running out of gas. He had been off in the wings during the escalating drama, spending his dwindling days walking dear old Boots when the weather was nice, swallowing his pills, coughing and gasping, drinking beer. Since retiring from the courthouse where he had been the chief clerk in the tax collector's office, Uncle Mike had gone on several gambling junkets to Las Vegas, but when his infirmities—high blood pressure, arthritis, asthma, failing eyesight, four or five other impairments—grounded him for good except for the walks with old Boots, his brown and white mongrel, he had taken on a hobby, writing Letters to the Editor.

Bring Back the Horse. Not only was the noble steed a safe, dependable means of transportation—it never needed anti-freeze, an oil change—but it

was a superlative fertilizer factory. *Coolidge's Star Is Rising.* Silent Cal had a New England twang and a dry wit and would have been a big hit at TV press conferences. *Today's Athletes Are Overpaid.* Look at Bronko Nagurski, seven thousand a season when he played for the Bears. *The Park Department Isn't Doing Its Job.* This in reference to the time poor old Boots plopped down on an ant hill; a friend of Uncle Mike's had bought some liquid ant poison for Uncle Mike, and Uncle Mike had taken it upon himself to use most of the poison to kill the ants. *Korean Toothpicks, Taiwanese Clothespins, What Next?* asked Uncle Mike, an ardent protectionist. These were but a few of his concerns.

Uncle Mike phoned Mildred in the last week of March. His eyesight had worsened to the extent that it had affected his typing, and his letters weren't being published as often as in the past, probably because the editors couldn't waste time deciphering them. (Uncle Mike subscribed to six newspapers, which gave him ample outlet for his opinions). Could Mildred stop in once a week for half an hour or so and type a letter of no more than two hundred words?

Mildred felt awful about Uncle Mike's request. Since won-

derful Harry with his rippling muscles and adorable mustache had engulfed her, she had forgotten all about Uncle Mike, who had been very good to her. For it was he who had gotten her a secretarial job in the courthouse after she finished high school, and he had helped her secure a bank loan when she had completed an evening beauty school course and wanted to open a shop of her own.

Over the years the two had exchanged Christmas and birthday cards, and Mildred had made it a point to visit Uncle Mike every two weeks or so since his retirement. And she had been in faithful attendance during the two times he had been hospitalized for heart attacks.

She apologized to him for having neglected him. And she would be glad to type his letters. Would early Sunday afternoon be all right? That was fine with Uncle Mike.

Harry surprised her. He didn't get mad, although lately he had become quite moody, touchy, snappish. Since Sunday was the only free day they had together—they usually dined out, went to a movie—Mildred anticipated that Harry's reaction would be . . . at least snappish. But after she nervously explained that Uncle Harry had never married, that she was his

only living relative, and that the poor old soul was not long for this world, good old Harry praised her to high heaven for being "a damn, fine, kind, decent . . . ah . . . you know . . . one'a them seminarians."

"Oooooohhhhhhhh, Hhhhh-aarrrrrryyyyy," bleated Mildred, rushing into his manly arms.

Came Sunday. Harry insisted on going along, although Mildred would have preferred otherwise. Of course he didn't say it, but he wanted to check things out, get an idea of how much the old boy was worth and how soon he'd turn up his heels.

Uncle Mike lived downtown in what had once been the town's best hotel. An eight story building, it had been converted into a retirement home. Meals were served. A nurse was always on duty. Doormen manned the lobby at all times. There was a large park directly behind the building, a bus stop out front. Pets were allowed, ordinary pets, no snakes, turtles, hamsters, eels.

Joe Hayes, the Sunday day shift doorman, a tall, thin, balding widower in his late fifties, retired with a disability pension—a bad leg—from a machine shop, shook hands with Harry when a blushing Mildred introduced the two. Joe, who hadn't seen Mildred since the

previous October, was shocked to see how thin she had become. Too thin, he thought.

Uncle Mike and Boots lived in three rather small rooms on the sixth floor. A wizened little ghostly wraith almost lost in a huge leather chair, Uncle Mike flung Harry a look of contempt from rheumy eyes when Mildred, hemming and hawing, introduced Harry as "Ah... my... ah... that is... he's... ah, my boyfriend, Uncle Mike... ha... ha..."

"Another fourflusher, eh, Mildred?" croaked Uncle Mike. "You'd better lock your pocketbook."

"Ha... ha... ha..." giggled Mildred. "Don't start teasing Harry, Uncle Mike; he might think you mean it. Hee... hee..."

"What makes you think I don't?" rasped Uncle Mike.

A bad start. Mildred pleaded with Harry, with her eyes, not to make a scene. Harry said nothing, but he was unable to control the strangled hiss that escaped his clenched teeth.

The topic that Sunday was *The Golden Years*. They were the bunk. In one hundred and eighty words of woe and rue, Uncle Mike, between quaffs of beer, explained that it was hell to be old and sick and lonely. Thank God for man's best friend. At which Boots, the grizzled

brown and white mongrel snoozing under the desk, responded with a proud, weak little woof.

While Mildred was taking down Uncle Mike's rambling dictation, Harry eased out of range, taking inventory. It didn't take long. The front room contained a couch, a TV, five or six chairs, some lamps, the leather chair, a large, old fashioned rolltop desk, a manual typewriter, circa 1939, on a metal stand, and books, newspapers, magazines piled all over the place. The bedroom, kitchen, bathroom contained only the bare essentials.

There was also the bottle of ant poison.

Over dinner that Sunday, Harry made casual inquiry about Mildred's prospects of becoming an heiress.

"Think the old bast... the old boy'll leave his money to you, doll?"

"Can't I have just one piece of butter, Harry, please, please?"

"Okay, doll," said Harry, magnanimously. "Here you are... there... now, what about it? The old boy ever tell you if he's gonna leave you anything?"

"All I know, Harry," said Mildred, stuffing the bread in her mouth, "is, first, that Uncle Mike's always been a heavy gambler and, second, as far as

me inheriting anything, all I know is that he's often said, 'Mildred, you're my sole heir. I won't forget you when I go.' That's what he says, Harry. . . . Can't I have the other piece of butter. Please?"

"Ah, what the hell. Go ahead."

"Ohhhhhh, Hhhharry. . . . you're so good, so good."

"Yeah. I know."

When they returned to the condo, Harry took off his shirt, flexed his gorgeous muscles. Mildred flung herself at him with wild abandon. Later—soft sensuous music from the stereo, funny little giggly purrs from Mildred—Harry made a suggestion: how about finding out from Uncle Mike exactly what she would inherit when the old coot finally hit the road.

"Oh, Harry," protested Mildred, purrless now, "I couldn't do that. It . . . well . . . it just wouldn't be right."

Fifteen minutes later she agreed that she would do it.

Meantime, while all this was going on, week after week Dear Diary was kept completely in the dark. Locked up in its gloomy dresser drawer, it could only swish, swish, swish its pretty pink tassel viciously, mad as hell but certain that the news had to be bad; otherwise Mildred would have waxed rhapsodic. Dear Diary was right. Mildred, worried to death, the

spa losing money hand over fist, the beauty salon a constant buzz of whisper and intrigue (the two assistants, Marge and Lou, passing the latest gossip about the boss along to the customers), had no desire to let Dear Diary in on the situation, knowing full well what Dear Diary's reaction would be. (I told you so, I told you so, but you wouldn't listen, would you? . . . Human beings . . . honest to God . . . they haven't learned a thing since Adam and Eve.)

When Sunday came round again, Harry agreed with Mildred that she should go alone. No use aggravating the old coot. Uncle Mike, twitching and shaking, streamlets of beer sloshing from the can, made no mention of Harry. Instead he plunged into a fulminating rebuttal to one "E. F. G., Wheaton, Ill.," who had written to the sports editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, rejoicing in the likelihood of night baseball's coming to Wrigley Field.

Uncle Mike was outraged. *No Lights at Wrigley Field*, he spat. Is nothing sacred? Korean toothpicks, Taiwanese clothespins, and now agitation for night baseball at Wrigley Field. What fiendish group is behind this nefarious plot to destroy the sole remaining bastion of the dear gone days when all base-

ball was played on real grass under the glorious summer sun? And so on. Uncle Mike was fit to be tied.

Mildred typed the letter. It wasn't easy, since, as she had discovered the previous Sunday, the keys of the old typewriter frequently stuck together. But she got it done, Uncle Mike scrawled a wobbly signature, Mildred typed the envelope, sealed and stamped it.

Then, ill at ease, she broached the subject of the forthcoming inheritance.

"Ah . . . Uncle Mike . . . well . . . what I mean is . . . what I'm trying to say is . . . Oh, I know you're going to live a long time yet, but just . . ."

Uncle Mike interrupted, beer foam sailing two feet from his lips, just missing Mildred.

"I better not hang around after November 15th," he groaned. "That's when it expires."

My God, thought poor Mildred, what now?

"It . . . it . . . you mean . . . what do you mean, 'it,' Uncle Mike?"

"My life insurance policy," he rasped. "Years ago, eight, ten, I forget how long, I quit paying on it, took out extended life, figuring I'd be gone long before it expired. It's for twenty-five thousand dollars, Mildred, you're the beneficiary. That's

about all you'll get, I'm afraid. I wasted my life . . . wasted it. Well, when I go, you contact Attorney Ben Peterson. He'll handle things."

"You mean, Uncle Mike," moaned Mildred, sick at heart for more reasons than one, "that . . . that . . . you know . . . your policy will become . . . ah . . . null and void after . . . November 15th?"

Yep, that's what he meant.

"Now I'm tired, Mildred," he mumbled. "Gonna take a nap. . . . Don't forget to mail the letter . . . and you better start eating. You're nothing but skin and bones."

Mildred was too upset to answer that. But she didn't forget to mail the letter, dropping it in the chute alongside the elevator.

Harry, hearing the story from a hand-wringing Mildred, took it calmly. Even though he was inwardly furious at the old bastard for having ended up with only a lousy twenty-five thousand dollar insurance policy, a deeper voice warned him to take it easy, don't fly off the handle. So, smiling a rueful, adorable, little boy smile, he said:

"Well, doll" (he called her "doll" now and then, not often enough for poor bewitched, bedazzled, becharmed Mildred—it was much, much worse than

"Oooooooooohhhhhhhhh, Hhh-hhhhhhhhaaaaaarrrrryyyyyyyyy," squealed Mildred, "you're so . . . so . . . so . . . just . . . oh, Harry."

Spare the Dandelion, a lovely brave flower which, if there were only one left in the whole world, would be worth a king's ransom; *Bring Back the Steam Engine*: with our country's enormous coal reserves and with the OPEC cartel constantly threatening to raise oil prices, why not return to steam; *Inexcusable Grammar on TV*: where were the high-priced anchorpersons when the fifth grade teacher was explaining that the object of a preposition is in the objective case? It is not "between you and I and the gatepost." It is "between you and me and the gatepost." For shame.

cruciating Sunday, Uncle Mike slobbering more and more, forgetting more and more, and Harry making life miserable for poor Mildred. Every Sunday there he was, at the door when she returned from Uncle Mike's. Well, what does he look like? Is he still kicking? What the hell's he trying to prove?

That stopped Harry. He needed Mildred. Without her it was all over. He turned on the old magic.

“Oooooooooooooooooooooohh-
hhhhhhhhhhhhh, Hhhhhhh-
hhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaarrrrrry-
yyyyyyy,” screeched a ju-
bilitant Mildred, the magic words
finally spoken by wonderful,
gorgeous, divine Harry.

Temporary bliss. Mildred couldn't keep it a secret. She gushed to Dear Diary:

"Harry and I are to be married after the first of the year. I am the luckiest girl in the

world. We shall dwell in paradise, dance among the stars, drink from wines never before tasted. I am . . . I am . . . I am . . . too happy to say anything more." (You are too goofy, snarled Dear Diary, back in its dark cubbyhole. Oh, you poor dear dumb ninny, don't you remember; you were going to dance among the stars with that fourflusher from Fort Wayne, hubby number one, and have you forgotten Harold, "Oooooohhhhhh, Hhhhaaarrrrooollllddd." Oh my God, look out.)

Bliss lasted long enough for Mildred to be persuaded to borrow five thousand dollars, using her beauty salon equipment as collateral. That staved off bankruptcy for another month or so. Summer waxed, Mildred waned (by early September Mildred had shrunk to a gaunt one thirty-two; wrinkles had appeared; the cute second chin had disappeared; and she was always starved, starved, deathly hungry). Harry, whose unconscious harbored a first-class Oedipus complex—his Brobdignagian mother had treated her wonderful son like a prince—found comfort on the sly in the well-upholstered arms of one Mimi Watson, a well-heeled fifty-year-old widow of Junoesque proportions to whom Harry confided during after-

noon assignations at Mimi's lakeside house that skinny women left him cold.

"Oooooohhhhhh, Hhhhhhaaarrrryyyyyy," cooed Mimi, "you're so . . . so . . . so wonderful. So wonderful."

"Yeah, I guess I am," smirked Harry.

There was sad news on the last Sunday in September. Boots had uttered two pathetic little yips and gone to dog heaven. A kind neighbor from Uncle Mike's floor had driven Uncle Mike and the late dear Boots out into the country to the pet cemetery, and Boots had been given a burial worthy of a much higher class dog. Uncle Mike even purchased a grave marker in the form of a fire hydrant.

Mildred was sincerely sorry to hear of Boots's departure. But she had her own worries. Both Marge and Lou from Mildred's—they really liked Mildred, hated to see her being made a sucker—had been hinting that word from several of the customers was that Mr. Bates had been spending several recent lunch hours at Mimi Watson's place. Poor Mildred. She told Marge and Lou to mind their own damn business. Poor Marge and Lou, only trying to help. That's what we get, they told one another; the hell with her, let her get taken like the other two bums took her.

Poor Mildred. She was afraid to ask Harry about the rumors. He would blow up. He was worse than ever nowadays.

Anyway, it was all Uncle Mike's fault. If he would only just . . . just . . .

So . . . a quick word of condolence about Boots and then: "Let's get going, Uncle Mike . . . I'm in a hurry. What is it today, ban Bulgarian meatballs?"

No, it was *Mrs. Coolidge Could Keep Score*.

"What the hell are you talking about?" demanded poor Mildred, at her wits' end.

What Uncle Mike meant was that he had been going through some cherished mementoes and had come across a ticket stub for the opening ball game at Griffith Field in Washington, D. C., in 1927. He and his dad had been at the game. Mrs. Coolidge—"she was a wonderful woman, Mildred, wonderful. A handsome brunette, educated, too. And she could keep score. She threw out the first ball that day . . . the Senators played the Yankees. How many presidents' wives do you think could keep score, Mildred?"

My God, my God, thought poor Mildred, whimpering to herself. *I'm going crazy.*

"I don't care how many. The hell with it. Where was her husband? . . . Taking a nap, I sup-

pose. Is this what you want to write today? Mrs. Coolidge could keep score?"

Yes, mumbled poor Uncle Mike, shrinking deeper into the leather chair, cringing under Mildred's anger.

"Well," demanded Harry, leaping up from in front of the TV when she came back to the condo, "what's the story?" The story was there was no story. Uncle Mike looked awful, terrible. But he was still alive.

"Now, Harry, please let me alone. I have to type this letter to the *Chicago Tribune*."

"What letter?" snarled Harry. Mildred, jumping back from his wrath, whined that the typewriter keys on Uncle Mike's old machine had stuck and she . . . well . . . had yelled that there'd be no letter that day. But the poor old soul started to cry and she had an idea. She had him sign his name on the bottom of a sheet of typing paper and told him she would type the letter on her own typewriter.

Harry went berserk. He grabbed the sheet of typing paper, attacked it as if it were a counterfeit twenty dollar bill that someone had foisted off on him. He tore it into shreds and flung the shreds at a horrified Mildred, who was appalled at his maniacal outburst.

It took Harry the better part

of an hour to smooth things over. It was just, he told her, smiling his rueful, little boy smile, that he so wanted things to work out so that the spa would succeed and he and Mildred could wed.

"Oooooohhhhh, Hhhhhharrryyy," gurgled Mildred as Dear Diary, having heard the fiery goings-on, slammed its pink tassel back and forth against the sides of the drawer, demanding to be told what the hell *that* was all about. Poor Dear Diary, it was to no avail.

It came to Harry at dinner, after the movie.

"Dear sweet Jesus," he suddenly said, a big chunk of steak halfway to his mouth. "God A'mighty, this is it... this is it."

"Huh?" went poor drooling Mildred, her whole being riveted on the heavenly piece of steak. "Huh, Harry?" A skinny, tepid, colorless piece of chicken was on *her* fork.

"Wait'll we get home, doll," replied Harry in a low, virile, conspiratorial voice. "I think our troubles are over."

"Does that mean I can have steak, too?" squealed Mildred. It just came out. Just like that.

"You sure can, doll," said Harry, reaching over and patting a once pleasantly plump hand. "Nothin's too good for my little doll."

He beckoned the waiter.

But there was even more to come. Back at the condo the shirt came off, the muscles rippled, the trumpet sounded. (What the hell is that? thought Dear Diary. "Taps" or "The Charge of the Light Brigade?") Mildred ran to Harry, hit her knee on the edge of a table, screamed in agony. (My God, he's killing her. Stop it, you brute, stop it. Police... *help*... *help!* Poor Dear Diary; no one heard.)

Much later that night, the knee barely throbbing, the rest of Mildred's anatomy in blissful, spent cuddle, Harry carefully, slowly—between nestle and nuzzle, fondle and stroke—explained what he had in mind. Mildred gasped, abruptly desnuggled. "*Oh my God, Harry,*" she whispered. "You can't mean it, you can't."

The hell he couldn't. He meant it. It was the only way. It was less than two months to November 15th. The way things looked, the old bast... old coot would still be around by then. That meant the spa would have to file for bankruptcy and Harry would have to leave town, the promised marriage gone by the boards.

"You wouldn't want that to happen, would you, doll?" he crooned.

"Oh my God, no, no, no,"

sobbed poor Mildred, clutching the nearest gorgeous bicep.

But by the following Sunday Mildred was a total, queasy, shivering wreck. And it wasn't due to the mammoth steaks and huge platters of fried potatoes that Harry had plied her with at a different restaurant every night. She had promised to murder a human being. She was horrified.

The inevitable came: Sunday. She had to be pushed out of the condo, Harry encouraging her with a long, lustful kiss and one last pat on the partially rejuvenated rump and a solemn promise that they two would wed no later than a month after Uncle Mike's twenty-five thousand was in hand.

Joe Hayes, the doorman, couldn't help saying it.

"Gee whiz, Mildred," he said, "are you all right? You're so pale and you're shaking. . . . You sure there's nothing wrong?"

Poor Mildred. She managed a feeble smile and told Joe that it was just old age creeping up.

"Ah, quit your kiddin'," replied Joe, grinning from ear to ear. "You're still a spring chicken."

"Oooohhhh Jooooeee," sniffled poor Mildred, getting into the elevator and pushing the button for the sixth floor.

Uncle Mike was in a melancholy mood. He had been think-

ing of Boots. He missed the old fellow. Did Mildred know that Boots was seventeen years old when he died? At least that's what Uncle Mike thought. He told Mildred that he had been trying to find Boots's birth certificate, given him when Uncle Mike adopted him from the humane society. But he couldn't find it. Did Mildred know whether Boots was born in September or November?

"How would I know? My God, Uncle Mike, who cares?" snapped Mildred. "Now, come on . . . let's hear today's letter. I'm ready. Come on. . . ."

It took a while, but Uncle Mike finally came up with a poignant remembrance of childhoods past when there were no TV's, no mopeds, no buses to take the kids to school. *Today's Kids Are Being Shortchanged*, he sighed, and rasped, and mumbled, beer spilling as usual. Oh, to return to yesteryear when the circus paraded down Main Street, the chestnuts ripened in the autumn woods, and the kids all celebrated the Fourth of July by throwing lighted two-inch thunderbolts at one another. Yes, and blew their dirty little fingers off, thought Mildred, taut as a bowstring, on the verge of choking Uncle Mike and screaming at him, "Why, why, why are you doing this to me and Harry? Why, Uncle

Mike, why are you torturing us?"

But she didn't choke, didn't scream. She took down the sad words of long ago. And less than ten minutes later she was out in the hall, clinging to the mail chute by the elevator, sobbing in her handkerchief.

It had gone exactly as Harry had predicted. Uncle Mike, oblivious to everything, had scrawled his wobbly signature on the bottom of a blank sheet of typing paper after Mildred's stumbling explanation that, just in case the typewriter keys stuck again, she would take the paper home and type the letter on her typewriter. This explanation meant nothing to poor old lost Uncle Mike. He signed, mumbling some incoherency about Boots.

She had been almost forced to lift Uncle Mike out of his chair, to get him to go to the kitchen for a glass of water for her. While he was gone, she took a pair of leather gloves from the deep pocket of her dress and, her heart racing, little bleating noises escaping her lips, she very, very carefully typed a short little suicide note, no more than thirty, thirty-five words. By the time wobbly old Uncle Mike staggered back from the kitchen, spilling the water, she had typed the envelope, addressed it to the editor of the

Locust Grove *News Press*, sealed it, stamped it, hastily put it into her handbag.

Then came the worst part. In the kitchen, leather gloves back on, she opened the cupboard, hoping against hope that the ant poison was no longer there.

"Ekkkkk," she went, not loud, just terrified. The bottle was still there. It looked up at her with unblinking malevolence. Sobbing, her whole rigid body shaking, she picked up the bottle, put it beside the refrigerator, took a can of beer from the refrigerator, poured a quarter of it into the sink, poured the poison into the can of beer, shook it.

After which . . . "Now . . . you . . . you . . . drink this . . . beer . . . beer . . . Uncle Mike. . . . It'll be good . . . for you." She fled from the apartment out to the hall, gasping for breath, sobbing between gasps.

She clung to the mail chute. Time passed. The elevator started up from down below. Stopped at the fourth floor. Went back down. Finally . . . it was now or never . . . do it or lose wonderful, gorgeous, divine Harry forever and ever and . . .

She reached into her pocket, took out the gloves, had a hell of a time putting them on. Reached into her handbag. Took out the letter. Moaned. Dropped

the letter in the chute. It went sailing merrily down, singing a small little song.

The door opened behind her. She whipped around. Uncle Mike, a barebones ghost, bundled up in an ancient overcoat, long scarf dragging on the floor, a Calvin Coolidge style hat askew on his head, staggered out. He stumbled over to Mildred and grabbed her for support.

"Mildred, it's you," he whispered. "I thought you . . . you're still here. . . . That's good. . . . I made a bad mistake . . . bad mistake. . . . I think I did . . . I have to be sure. . . . You can take me . . . let's go. . . ."

Struck dumb, Mildred could only go "aahhhhh . . . ah . . . h . . . eh," something like that; funny, peculiar sounds.

"You have to take me," mumbled Uncle Mike, holding on for dear life.

Mildred found words. Had he . . . did he . . . the beer . . . had he . . . had he drunk the . . . the . . . the beer . . . the . . . thhhhheee bbbbeerrrrr?

No, he hadn't. It had suddenly come to him that . . . well . . . he couldn't tell her. He was going to ask a neighbor to drive him out to the pet cemetery. But now she could take him.

Half crazy—my God, Harry'll kill me—Mildred implored Uncle Mike to go back to the apart-

ment. It was a cold day. He would catch his death of cold. No use. Uncle Mike kept mumbling that he had to go to the pet cemetery.

Downstairs, Joe Hayes, learning where they were going, tried to talk Mildred out of it.

"Gee, Mildred, it's a rotten day, and you don't look too good. You shouldn't go . . ."

What could she say to Joe with Uncle Mike tugging at her, trying to pull her along?

Out at the cemetery the wind howled, the trees moaned, dark clouds scudded across a mean sky, and rain began to fall. It took Uncle Mike a while to find the fire hydrant marker. Engraved on the marker was:

BOOTS—Dear Pal
Born Nov. 15, 1966
Died Sept. 20, 1983

Mildred had to read it for Uncle Mike. And yell it out over the wind.

"I was right," moaned Uncle Mike. "I was wrong."

That made no sense whatsoever to Mildred, windblown, cold, completely drained.

"Come on, come on," she yelled, pulling Uncle Mike. "You're going home."

"So long, old pal," sobbed Uncle Mike. "I'll . . . be . . . with you . . . soon."

Back in front of the retire-

ment home, Mildred, a total wreck, helped a tottering Uncle Mike to the front door.

"Now, promise me you'll drink the beer," she whimpered, every word burning a hole in her heart. "Promise."

Uncle Mike mumbled something. Then he spoke clearly:

"Let me kiss you goodbye, Mildred. . . . Please . . . bend down . . . you've been good to me . . . kind. . . . You're a wonderful person, Mildred . . . and I'm going to see that you're rewarded."

Poor Mildred. She bent down. The old chap planted a wet kiss on her cold cheek. She ran to the car, tears streaming down her face. Just before she made a right turn, she looked back in the rear view mirror. Uncle Mike was at the curb, swaying in the wind, waving a feeble goodbye.

She collapsed when she reached the condo. "Let me alone. Let me alone," she sobbed to Harry as she ran across the room and flung herself on the couch. Harry, looking a bit apprehensive in spite of having fortified himself with four or five belts of whisky, had sense enough to stay away from her. Her muffled sobs could be heard for the next twenty minutes.

The phone rang. Harry leaped for it. The caller was Joe Hayes. Could he speak to Miss Zebley?

Harry said that she was kinda under the weather. Could he take the message?

There was bad news. Miss Zebley's uncle was dead. Harry had to bite his tongue to hold back a thunderous shout of glee.

"Ah . . ." he finally managed, "that's tough. Old age finally caught up with the old coot . . . I mean . . . you know . . . the old chap, eh?"

No, that wasn't it. Mr. Hanigan had been killed by an auto right in front of his building.

"What?"

"Yeah, right smack out front. Funny thing; it looked like he walked right into the car. Like he was trying to do it. But, well, his eyesight wasn't very good. I saw it all, gave me an awful shock. Well . . . you'll tell Miss Zebley how sorry all of us are, won't you?"

Yeah, sure, sorry, yeah, sure, sorry, everybody. A stunned Harry hung up. Now what the hell happened? She fouled up, didn't she? Wouldn't ya think she could . . . wait a minute . . . wait just a minute . . . he's dead, ain't he . . . ain't that what we wanted?

"Mildred . . . doll . . . Mildred . . . listen to this . . . this'll kill ya . . ." yelled Harry, rushing over to the couch.

It took a while for it all to sink in. It finally did.

"Oh my God, oh my God," babbled Mildred at last. "I didn't do it, I didn't do it. . . . Thank God . . . thank God But . . . what about the . . . the poisoned beer, Harry . . . what if someone drinks it . . . oh my God."

Harry tried to talk her out of it, but Mildred was absolutely adamant. She hurried over to the retirement home, Harry staying at the condo. Joe Hayes spent a lot of time offering condolences. She thanked him, went upstairs, used her key to enter the apartment. The can of beer was still there. She grabbed it. She poured it down the sink. Ran water into the can for a good five minutes before discarding it in the wastebasket. What in God's name got into me, she whimpered.

Relief, wonderful, joyous relief, almost overwhelmed her on the way back to the condo. Then . . . she nearly wrecked the car. My God . . . my God . . . what if . . . what if . . . oh my God . . . Harry will go crazy . . . I won't ask him . . . I'll check it myself.

A half hour later an extremely cooperative Harry was only too glad to go out and pick up a couple of medium-sized pizzas. As soon as he had gone, Mildred rushed to the dresser drawer underneath Dear Diary's dark and gloomy abode.

Dear Diary, hearing her, swished madly to no avail; Mildred being too intent on getting out her own twenty thousand dollar insurance policy (gorgeous Harry the beneficiary). Her hands shaking, her poor heart racing, she checked the policy. Yes, it had a suicide clause. But the clause only lasted for a year. After that the policy paid, suicide or not. My God, does Uncle Mike's policy have such a clause? My God . . . if I ever get out of this terrible mess, I'll be a changed girl. I swear it.

Attorney Ben Peterson handled the funeral arrangements. Fifteen mourners showed up (Harry stayed away—"wouldn't look right," he said): Mildred, Joe Hayes, Attorney Peterson, two wizened old codgers from the retirement home, the rest some withered old reprobates from Uncle Mike's poker-playing days.

There were several surprises in the will, read the following afternoon in Attorney Peterson's office. Harry insisted on going along with Mildred. She had to introduce him to Attorney Peterson, as—her head down—her voice a barely audible mumble, "Mr. Bates . . . a . . . a friend . . . Attorney Peterson . . . Harry . . ."

Harry gripped Attorney Pe-

tersen's hand in a mighty grip and announced charmingly that he was "mighty pleased to meet you, sir, mighty pleased."

"H'mmmmm," retorted Attorney Peterson, jerking his hand away.

Boots made out all right. If he outlived his master, he was to receive the sum of fifteen hundred dollars to take care of him. If he passed away before his master, the fifteen hundred was to go to the pet cemetery to keep Boots's grave neat and flowery, and the cemetery people were to be specifically instructed not to touch any dandelion that might grow on Boots's grave.

Attorney Peterson, a thin, stooped, blue-eyed octogenarian, made out to the extent of \$2356.80, the will specifying that "whatever is left after all expenses are paid is to go to my good friend and long-time poker-playing buddy, Attorney Ben Peterson."

There was a pause here. Attorney Peterson seemed to be seeking inspiration from the ceiling. Harry couldn't stand it.

"What about the twenty-five thousand dollar insurance policy?" he demanded, half out of his seat.

"Oh, so you know about that, ah, Mr. . . . I seem to have forgotten your name."

"Bates—Harry Bates,"

snarled Harry. "Damn right I . . . we . . . know about it, don't we, Mildred?"

Poor Mildred—something had gone wrong, she was sure—could only nod her head, up and down, up and down.

"Yes, the life insurance policy," resumed Attorney Peterson, looking at Mildred and thinking, the poor girl. "Too bad, an unlucky break for you, Miss Zebley. You were the beneficiary. Unfortunately the policy expired on September 20th, less than three weeks ago."

Mildred screamed. Harry cursed. Attorney Peterson hummed an old-time tune, "The Old Gray Mare She Ain't What She Used To Be."

Then Mildred found her voice.

"That's what he meant," she moaned. "That's what he meant. He was thinking of Boots's birthday instead of . . . oh my God. . . ."

"What the hell are you talking about?" snarled wonderful, gorgeous, divine Harry, his mustache in total disarray, the wax having melted under the hideous letdown.

"S'h'h'h'h'h'h, Mr. Bates," cautioned Attorney Peterson. Harry shushed, hissing like a bull alligator caught in a beartrap.

"That's better," resumed Attorney Peterson. "Now that that particular . . . ah . . . problem

is disposed of, we have another one . . . to wit . . . ah, your uncle had another insurance policy, Miss Zebley, for a hundred thousand dollars, an accident policy."

"Oh my God!" screamed Mildred.

"Hot damn," yelled Harry, leaping from his seat, hands waving jubilantly.

Attorney Peterson waited.

"You mean," Harry screeched, mellifluous long gone, "that we . . . she . . . us . . . whoopee !"

Mildred said nothing. She was beyond shock.

Attorney Peterson waited for Harry to calm down. Then he continued.

"We have here an extraordinary case. Three witnesses state that Mr. Hannigan seemed to walk into traffic deliberately, as if . . . well . . . I shall leave that unsaid. But, even so, since Mr. Hannigan was an old man, half blind, in his dotage, there would have been no question of the insurance company's paying off . . . but as each of you is probably aware, accident policy premiums are very low . . . and as such, all such policies contain a clause negating them in case of suicide . . ."

"Oh my God," went Mildred.

Harry merely moaned.

"To continue," continued Attorney Peterson, "the insurance company contacted me, was in

the process of issuing a check to you, Miss Zebley, when the local police notified me that they had in their possession a suicide note signed by Mr. Hannigan. I verified the signature. The note was sent to the Locust Grove *News Press*. We shall never know what possessed the poor man, shall we?"

That was it for Mildred. She let out a long, piercing shriek and fainted. There is no need to record Harry's reaction.

It is another October night, two years from the moment wonderful, gorgeous, divine Harry appeared through the smoky murk. In the last booth of the Wayward Tavern, up against the wall, is seated a neatly dressed, pleasantly plump blonde woman of between thirty-nine and fifty-one. She has a faraway look in her soft blue eyes, a wisp of a sad smile on her chubby red lips (the harvest moon outside might have something to do with it).

Through the murk appears a gorgeous stranger—six feet four, two hundred pounds of rippling muscle and bushy red mustache. He speaks, mellifluously:

"Hi there, beautiful, mind if I share the booth?"

The pleasantly plump blonde jerks her head in his direction. She is smitten with icy-fingered horripilation. My God,

she gasps inwardly. The dazzling stranger, confident of his quintessential superlativeness, starts to sit down.

"Whooopppsss," squeals the blonde, suddenly alive to the danger. She makes unseemly haste to scoot her corseted rump toward the end of the booth, effectively stopping His Gorgeous Nibs in mid-squat.

"Sorry," the blonde says, a bit highpitched, a bit doleful, "but... the... I'm waiting for someone... sorry."

"Oh," replies His Gorgeousness, looking suddenly huffy. "Well... you don't know what you're missing." And off he stomps in high pique.

"Who was that, Mildred?" asks Joe Hayes, returning from the counter with two triple decker hamburgers and two heaping platters of french fries.

"Oh... you know... just one'a them... you know."

"Oh," says Joe, biting into his hamburger.

Mildred was sorely tempted to tell Dear Diary all about the handsome stranger with the

mustache and muscles. But she resisted the urge.

After the spa had gone bankrupt and Harry had left town with Mimi Watson, Mildred eventually filled Dear Diary in on... some of the stuff. Not all, by any means. But she did promise that "someday, when I am old and grey and old songs come whispering back on autumn nights, maybe, just maybe, you'll let me go back and relive the... the good times... for there were some good times... some real good times... even though... it almost was... well... someday."

Dear Diary just nodded. Didn't make any wisecracks about Mildred's being already pretty far into Old and Grey. For, just like Mildred, Dear Diary was getting up there. Getting to the point where she could smile wistfully and shed a little tear when Mildred, as she did yesterday, confided that:

"I had better start dieting... do you know I am back up to ~~one hundred~~ ~~eighty~~ ~~eighty~~ Next week I start... for sure."

With the story below, we conclude our three-part backward look at some of the actual stories used on the original Alfred Hitchcock television series of the 1950's and 1960's. This time we bring you a Jack Ritchie tale published in AHMM in October, 1963, and shown on TV on May 1, 1964. —ED.

FICTION

Ten Minutes from Now

by Jack Ritchie

Illustration by Hank Blaustein



The box I carried was approximately nine by nine by nine, and it was wrapped securely in common brown paper.

I entered the huge lobby of the city hall and strode rapidly

toward the elevators. I noticed several policemen scattered throughout the crowd, some of whom seemed to take more than a passing interest in what I carried—or perhaps it was my beard which attracted their at-

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tention. However, none of them attempted to intercept me.

The elevator took me to the third floor. In the corridor I walked by several more policemen, one of whom rubbed his jaw and frowned as I passed.

I opened the door to the mayor's reception room. Except for a single young man at a desk at the far end, it was unoccupied.

His eyes flicked uneasily to the box I carried. "May I help you?"

"You may. I would like to see the mayor immediately."

His tongue ran over apparently dry lips. "Do you have an appointment?"

"I would have mentioned it if I did." I glanced at my watch. "It is absolutely imperative that I see him at once."

"Just one moment," he said quickly. He darted through a door behind him, and I thought I heard the click of a Yale lock.

There followed approximately four minutes of silence, and then the door from the corridor edged open cautiously.

A tall man in a plain blue suit hesitated in the doorway. Behind him a number of uniformed police officers craned their necks.

He glanced at the box, then at me, and seemed to gauge the situation. Then he motioned the officers behind him to re-

treat. He sidled into the room alone and closed the door. "Did you want to see Mayor Pettibone?"

"Are you Mayor Pettibone?"

"No," he said swiftly. "I'm Lieutenant Wymar." He manufactured a smile. "Why do you want to see the mayor?"

"That is plainly my business."

There was an uneasy silence and then I thought that his ears suddenly flared, radar-like, in reception of a sound. He pointed to the box I held in my hands. "Is that thing *ticking*?"

It was.

The box almost slipped from my lap, but I managed to retrieve it before it hit the floor. When I looked up, I saw that the lieutenant's eyes were clamped shut and he seemed to be waiting tensely for something to happen.

His eyes finally opened and he exhaled. "What's in that box?"

"That is *also* my business." I consulted my watch again. "I must see the mayor within the next *ten* minutes. Not one second later."

He seemed to brighten a little. "Ten minutes?" He took several steps forward. "The mayor is busy right now. Couldn't you come back later?"

"No." I put the box down on the bench beside me. "If I don't

see the mayor immediately, I am tempted to blast my way into his office."

What occurred next was lightning fast. Wymar's hands seized my package and he flung open the corridor door. "Quick! Somebody get a bucket of water! This thing's timed to go off in less than ten minutes."

I followed on his heels. "See here, what's the meaning of this?"

He ignored me. "Damn it, doesn't *anybody* have a bucket of water?"

I glimpsed half a dozen policemen dashing about. One of them wrenched open a door which proved to be a janitor's closet. It contained various cleaning materials and a deep sink. He immediately plugged the sink and opened both faucets wide. "Over here, lieutenant!"

Wymar thrust the package into the sink, and in a few moments it was completely immersed in water.

I watched the air bubbles rising from the submerged package and sighed. "I *do* hope it's waterproof."

Wymar's eyes widened. "Waterproof? I never thought of that." He waved a hand. "Everybody back! The bomb may go off any minute."

I found myself automatically involved in a retreat to the end

of the corridor.

"Somebody phone the bomb squad," Wymar ordered.

A very young policeman saluted. "Yes, sir. What's the number?"

Wymar turned purple. However he immediately pointed to a sergeant. "Murphy, get the bomb squad."

The sergeant departed and Lieutenant Wymar's attention returned to me. I was rather forcibly escorted into an empty room down on the second floor.

Two policemen remained to guard me while Wymar departed, presumably to superintend evacuation activities. He returned fifteen minutes later looking considerably relieved. "The bomb boys are here."

And then he removed a sheet of paper from an envelope and thrust it before my eyes. "You wrote this, didn't you?"

He would not let me touch the paper, and so I had to squint as I read the typewritten words.

"Mayor Pettibone:

"Your actions on the Veterans' Memorial development were arbitrary and clearly not in the public interest. Since there seems to be no legal means of removing you from office immediately, I intend to blow you to kingdom come.

"The Avenger"

I shook my head. "Elite type. I prefer pica. Much easier to read."

He scowled. "Did you or did you not write this note?"

"My dear sir, if I intended to blow up the mayor, would I forewarn him?"

"Maybe," Wymar said. "Some bombers are nuts."

I smiled. "Are my fingerprints on the note?"

Evidently there weren't any fingerprints on the note, except possibly the mayor's, because Wymar did not answer the question. "What's your name?"

"James B. Bellington," I said.

He began writing in a notebook. "James C. Bellington."

I corrected him. "James B. Bellington. As in bomb."

"And your address?"

"I have a room in the Medford Hotel. A miserable place, but it is all I can afford at the present time."

"Did you lose any money when the Veterans' Memorial development was switched from the east to the north side?" He paused.

I patted a stray hair of my beard. "I refuse to say another word until I've seen my lawyer."

At that moment one of the men who was evidently a member of the bomb squad entered the room. He was encased in pads and he carried my soggy

package. He levered up his mesh face mask and spoke. "We checked it out, lieutenant."

"Well?" Wymar demanded.

The padded gentleman shrugged. "An alarm clock. That's all. Just a cheap alarm clock."

"Of course an alarm clock," I seconded testily. "What did you expect? A bomb?"

Wymar spoke in a slightly strangled voice. "Do you still want to see Mayor Pettibone?"

"Not at the moment. I'm afraid the mood has left me." I smiled slightly. "You *do* protect the mayor very well, don't you? A thing like that is nice to know. Anyone wishing to blow him to bits would have to be very clever about it, wouldn't he?"

Lieutenant Wymar's eyes narrowed slightly as he studied me.

I rose. "Good afternoon, gentlemen."

Wymar remembered something. "Don't forget your alarm clock."

I shrugged. "I'm afraid it is ruined. You may keep it for exhibition in the police museum." I smiled again. "Tell Mayor Pettibone that I shall return. Perhaps this after—" I stopped, waved amiably, and departed.

In the lobby downstairs I purchased a five-pack of panatellas. I lit one of them and continued out into the street.

At the corner newsstand, I stopped and glared at the garish magazines exhibited, especially those which apparently appealed most to people with damp palms. After a while I snorted. "Rubbish. Absolutely rubbish."

The newsstand attendant, an elderly man in a frayed overcoat girdled with a change maker, sighed. "Look, mister, if you want a copy, just stick it under your coat and give me the money. I won't tell nobody."

"Sir," I said stiffly, "I would not be caught dead with any one of these miserable rags. They should be banned from sale."

He favored the sky with a weary appeal. "Why don't you just go to the library and borrow yourself a solid book? Like medical. I'm just a poor man engaged in private enterprise."

I pointed my walking stick at the base of the stand. "One bomb placed right there could blow your messy literature sky high." I took two savage puffs of my cigar and strode away without looking back.

A block farther, as I waited for a light to change, I glanced back. A tall man in a trenchcoat appeared to be conferring with the attendant. They both looked my way, and the attendant shrugged.

The light changed, and I

crossed the street. I entered a large dime store and purchased a cheap alarm clock. Downstairs, in the hardware department, I bought two dry cells and five feet of No. 20 telephone wire. Returning down the aisle on my way back to the stairs, I passed the man in the trenchcoat. He seemed to be supremely absorbed in a display of cafe curtains.

Out on the street, I lit a fresh cigar. The weather was rather damp, but it was the type of day I prefer. It stimulates the blood.

I walked smartly for several blocks when it began to drizzle. At the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, I hesitated. I glanced at the facade. Horrible taste, I thought. How much dynamite would it require to destroy a monstrosity such as that?

I tossed away my cigar and ascended the flight of stairs to the entrance. Inside, I wandered about and eventually reached a small gallery at the rear of the building.

For one of conservative tastes, the exhibit was truly one to raise the hackles—an indiscriminate mixture of Utrillos, Picassos, and Modiglianis. I scowled and sharply rapped my walking stick on the brass rail. "Tripe. Complete tripe."

One of the uniformed guards appeared at my elbow.

"Don't do that, mister. You're

denting the brass rail."

I indicated one of the paintings. "This appears to me to be nothing more than a badly wounded piece of canvas."

He seemed to agree. "You can't blame them boys too much, though. The invention of the camera must of hit them pretty hard. Like automation and you got to learn a new trade."

"They should be burned," I said firmly. "Every last one of them. Or better yet, blown to bits. To shreds."

"Mister," the guard said, "if you got to point, do it with your finger. Not the cane. I got to account for any holes in them pictures."

I spent the next fifteen minutes amid the mental security of the Dutch masters.

When I returned to the street, it had stopped raining. At the first corner I noticed the man in the trenchcoat descending the steps of the museum. Apparently he had been in the building while I had been there.

I rubbed my beard.

Now I entered a succession of stores, departing immediately via side and rear entrances. Eventually I established beyond doubt that I was no longer followed. In the neighborhood of my hotel, I purchased a quarter pound of butter, a quart of milk, a loaf of bread, some cold cuts, and a five pound bag of sugar.

As I entered the Medford, I noticed the man in the trenchcoat in a lobby chair reading a newspaper.

In my room, I constructed a sandwich and re-read last night's newspaper, principally the article dealing with the Veterans' Memorial Center. It was to be an ambitious project encompassing several acres and consisting of a number of buildings. The anticipated site had been a stretch of semi-tenements near the lakefront. As a matter of fact, it had been so well anticipated that there had been brisk selling and buying by a number of individuals, and the value of the properties had suddenly skyrocketed.

Yesterday, however, the City Council, mostly as the result of pressure from Mayor Pettibone, had decided to switch the site to a more northerly—and cheaper—location. Needless to say, a number of holders of the originally planned site had lost their shirts.

My phone rang and Geoffrey Mipple was on the line.

Geoffrey and I were roommates at college and have since preserved our fast friendship. On any number of subjects we are of a like mind.

"James?"

"Yes," I said.

"Did you go to the mayor's office?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"Just about what I anticipated."

"Are you going back again this afternoon?"

"I believe so." I took a bite of my sandwich. "You're not calling from your room, are you?"

"No. A telephone booth."

"Good." I hung up, finished my glass of milk, and then went to the closet. I removed an empty cubic box from the top shelf and went to work.

At two that afternoon, I reached for the phone and got the desk clerk. "Could you tell me how long the city hall is open today?" I asked.

"Is this Mr. Bellington?"

"Yes."

There was an appreciable pause. Perhaps he was conferring with someone. He returned to the phone. "The city hall is open twenty-four hours a day. However, almost all of the offices close at five. Is there anyone in particular you wanted to see?"

"Yes. There is." I looked at my watch. "Would you please have a taxi waiting for me in approximately twenty minutes?"

I smoked two inches of my cigar and then put on my coat. I carried my cubic box when I left the room.

The desk clerk's eyes seemed

both curious and wary as he glanced at my package. "Your taxi is waiting, sir."

A single taxi stood at the curb. I entered, gave my destination, and as we pulled away, so did another taxi about half a block behind us.

At the city hall, I noticed a peculiar vehicle parked near one of the side entrances. It was quite metallically sturdy, and its rear consisted of a huge wickerwork cage.

The lobby was incredibly crowded and one had the impression of a defense alert with everyone evacuated to the main floor. At the elevators, a number of policemen seemed to be turning back anyone who wished to ascend.

I expected similar treatment, and yet a path cleared before me and I found myself in the elevator alone with the operator. At the third floor he quickly opened the door, and when he descended alone I had the impression that it was at high speed.

The corridor before me was completely empty, and my footfalls echoed and re-echoed. When I opened the door to the mayor's reception room, I once again found the nervous young man alone at the desk.

"I would like to see the mayor," I said. "Within the next ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," he said hastily. "Of course. Would you please take a seat over there?" He pointed to a leather-upholstered davenport.

I sat down and placed the box carefully beside me.

The receptionist cleared his throat. "Would you do me a small favor, sir?"

"Perhaps."

He got up. "I have to move this bookcase from *here* over to *there*. Would you lend me a hand? Or rather, *two* hands?"

I sighed. "Very well." I left my box and grasped one end of the bookcase. "Ready?"

At that precise moment, the corridor door burst open, and Lieutenant Wymar, followed by a bevy of policemen, stormed into the room. Two well-padded gentlemen in masks appeared in their wake.

One of the masked men spoke. "Everybody out of the room. And don't touch the box." He turned to Lieutenant Wymar. "We'll roll in our machine and X-ray the package just where it is."

Again very shortly I found myself in a room far removed from the mayor's office, with Lieutenant Wymar glowering over me. "You've got a one-track mind, haven't you?"

"One-track mind?"

"That's right. You threatened to blow up a newsstand."

I blinked. "Sir, never in my life would I . . ."

He raised a hand. "Don't bother to deny it. We had you followed when you left here. And you also threatened to blow up the Metropolitan Museum of Arts."

"Only the modern paintings," I corrected. "Have you seen that pathetic Utrillo in which he attempts . . ."

"We also know that you bought another alarm clock, some dry cells, some . . ."

The door opened and one of the padded technicians entered. "It's definitely a bomb, lieutenant. We can make out the dry cells, the wiring, the alarm clock, and the powder charge."

I spent four hours in jail before Lieutenant Wymar saw me again, and when he did he appeared as frustrated as a lip reader at a ventriloquist's convention. With him was an intentionally informal young man wearing a crewcut, a tweed jacket, and a smile of professional wisdom.

Lieutenant Wymar seemed to have difficulty restraining an urge to throttle me. "The powder charge wasn't a powder charge."

I smiled. "Really?"

His hands opened and closed. "It was just a bag of sugar."

I nodded. "If only you'd asked me."

Wymar turned abruptly to his companion. "All right, doc. He's all yours."

When the doctor and I were alone, he offered me a cigar from a new five-pack. It was my brand, and he had evidently done research.

He lit the cigar for me. "My name is Dr. Barton. Dr. Sam Barton. Just call me Sam."

"Why?"

He blew out the match. "Do you often have this compulsion to blow up things? People?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

He smiled tolerantly. "Did you lose heavily in the Veterans' Memorial operation?"

I said nothing.

"And do you blame Mayor Pettibone? Well, do you or don't you?"

"I believe I'm catching a cold," I said.

He smiled conspiratorily. "You were just *testing* their defenses, weren't you?"

I sneezed.

He almost patted me on the knee. "Yes. *Testing*. The first time just an alarm clock. Then the alarm clock and the mechanisms, but not the powder charge. And you will keep taking boxes with you until the police get... how shall we say?... *tired*? Until they no longer bother... and then one day..." He seemed to search for the next word.

"Pow?"

He nodded. "*Pow*." And now for half a minute he became thoughtful. "But the mechanism of the bomb would have to be different from what it is now, wouldn't it? After all, if you merely set the clock for a certain time, there would be no guarantee that you would be *with* Mayor Pettibone precisely at the time when the bomb is due to go off."

"You have an incisive mind."

He flushed slightly. "I was always rather good at logic in school. Straight A's." He leaned forward. "You would have to have something on the *outside* of the package. Something like a *doorbell push button*? And when you *pressed* the button, the bomb would go off."

I savored my cigar. "Open circuit? Closed circuit?"

He rubbed his chin. "With an open circuit, when you pressed the push button, the circuit would *close*... and then the bomb..."

He stopped and shook his head slowly. "No. That wouldn't really do, you know."

"It wouldn't?"

"No. You see, when you are carrying this package, couldn't the police put a bullet through your head?"

"That seems reasonable to me."

He nodded. "And don't you

see, the sudden termination of your life might not even leave you with sufficient reflex to *push* the button."

"That is a problem."

"And so we come to the *closed* circuit system of wiring. In this case the current is already flowing through the circuit, but the bomb does not explode because the contact device is held magnetically immobilized by the current. However, when the push button is *released*, demagnetization ensues, the contact device is released, and . . ."

I supplied the word again.

"*Pow?*"

"Precisely." He smiled at his triumph of electromagnetic reasoning. "In other words, if the police shot you through the head, it would actually serve no constructive purpose. Your finger would merely release its pressure on the push button and the bomb would go off anyway."

"By George," I said admiringly, "I believe you have it."

He frowned thoughtfully. "You haven't bought a push button yet, have you?"

"No. But if I ever do, you will be the first to know."

He was pleased at the precedence. "Now remember, when you *do* buy a push button, *don't* use it until you talk to me first." He took a card with his name and office address from his

pocket. "In the meantime, would you care to come to see me? On Thursday at ten A.M."

"Just for a visit?"

"Of course," he said reassuringly.

"Then I am not to be kept in jail?"

"Of course not. You are free to go."

"Why?"

"Well . . . actually the police have nothing on which to hold you. Not even disorderly conduct . . . since it appears that it was actually the police who were disorderly. And since your package wasn't really . . . on closer examination . . . *rigged* as a bomb . . ."

"And there is no law against peacefully carrying a conglomeration of objects in a package?"

He nodded. "And besides, it's the district attorney's private suspicion that this may turn out to be some scheme whereby you get to sue the city." He studied me earnestly. "Will you?"

"I hadn't planned on it."

He seemed relieved. "Good. And besides, I prefer my own theory . . . that you were *testing*."

Twenty minutes later I found myself free on the streets. After walking a block, I once again observed that the man in the trenchcoat was dogging my footsteps.

It was evening now, and I found it not at all difficult to lose him. When I had satisfied myself of that accomplishment, I returned to the lighted downtown section and entered a dime store.

I purchased a push button.

I did not return to my own hotel room. Instead I registered at Geoffrey's hotel and then went to his room.

Geoffrey is a thin, pipe-smoking man. "Are you going back tomorrow?"

"Yes," I said. "I've purchased the push button."

"Well . . . good luck. I hope it goes off this time."

"Thank you. It should."

I did not sleep well that night. I had a number of catastrophe dreams, the most vivid of which being the disintegration of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts in one tremendous explosion.

In the morning, I returned to Geoffrey's room and we constructed my third and final cubic package.

At ten o'clock, I phoned Dr. Barton. "Doctor, I just bought a push button."

He was disturbed. "You have? So soon? But you haven't had a session with me yet."

"I called to bid you goodbye. I do not believe that we shall meet in this world again."

"Now wait a minute," he said desperately. "What are you

going to do?"

"I am going to see Mayor Pettibone. This morning I shall not fail."

"Where are you now? At your hotel?"

"No." I hung up.

I sat down and read the morning's paper while I smoked a full cigar. Then I went downstairs with my cubic box and directed the first taxi driver to take me to the city hall.

However, one block before my destination, I ordered him to pull to the curb. I paid my fare and stepped out onto the sidewalk. I carried the package in front of me, one thumb firmly depressing the push button affixed to its top.

I surveyed the panorama before me.

The avenue ahead was innocent of all vehicles and pedestrians. The side streets had been roped off, and uniformed policemen were stationed at intervals to see that none of the spectators—and there appeared to be *thousands*—trespassed into the clearing. In effect, a wide path led directly to the entrance of the city hall.

To one side I spied Lieutenant Wymar and Dr. Barton. The latter, as a matter of fact, seemed to be hiding behind a lamppost.

With all those thousands of eyes staring at me, I suddenly

experienced a new and strange sensation.

Stage fright.

I took two tentative steps toward the city hall, then I turned abruptly and walked away.

For some moments there was silence behind me and then Lieutenant Wymar shouted. "Hey, wait a minute!"

I walked faster.

When I glanced back, I saw him, Dr. Barton, and a host of police officers in pursuit.

I broke into a trot.

Hundreds of pedestrians seemed to join the procession behind me.

I dashed down the block, glanced back again, paused for a breath, and quickly darted up the stairs of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts. The swarming mass turned in my direction, and I dashed into the building.

I puffed badly as I trotted through the Dutch masters. Behind me the roar of the chase clung like adhesive. My heart thumped with the exertion as I quickly traversed an exhibition of Roman sculpture. The relentless pursuit continued.

Eventually only one corridor remained ahead of me. I staggered past two startled guards into the exhibition of modern art. At the far end of the gallery I came face to face with a blank wall. I turned and faced the far door.

The pack surged through the doorway, Lieutenant Wymar and Dr. Barton acting as point.

I held up my free hand and shouted with evident hysteria. "Stop! Everybody *stop*! One more step and I shall release this push button!"

Lieutenant Wymar and his army skidded to a halt—possibly leaving heel marks on the marble floor.

I took several breaths before I managed to speak again. "Lieutenant Wymar, I have decided to give up trying to see Mayor Pettibone. Apparently he is completely inaccessible."

That was pleasant information for the lieutenant. "Well, now you're showing some sense." He took a quick, eager step forward.

"*Halt!*" I shouted, my voice verily ricocheting off the walls. "One more step and I shall release this button."

Lieutenant Wymar froze.

I again raised my voice for an announcement. "In exactly ten minutes, I shall release this push button. I would do so at this exact instant, except for the simple fact that I have a desire to regain my breath before making such a momentous decision."

Dr. Barton cleared his throat uneasily. "If we could just talk to you for . . ."

"On the other hand," I said,

"waiting to regain one's breath at a time like this is frivolous . . . procrastinating . . . Perhaps I should . . ."

Dr. Barton spoke quickly. "No. No. By all means, regain your breath."

Lieutenant Wymar turned to an aide at his side. "Just how much damage could that box do if it went off?"

His assistant frowned thoughtfully. "It's hard to say, lieutenant. With some of these new combinations, he might be able to blow up the whole building."

I looked at my watch. "In *nine* minutes I shall release the button."

The lieutenant made a swift decision. "Clear the building. Hop to it." He then spoke to Dr. Barton. "You stay here and try to talk him out of it."

Dr. Barton seemed unhappy. "I really don't think I could do anything in a case like this, lieutenant. We need somebody with a little more experience in this particular field." He looked at me hopefully. "A priest? A minister? A rabbi?"

"Eight minutes," I said.

Dr. Barton immediately joined the general retreat.

Through the doorway I saw that my pursuers had at least temporarily halted in the sculpture department. I smiled grimly and advanced. The retreat re-

commenced immediately.

A new and unique emotion took possession of me.

The feeling of power.

I found myself chuckling as now I pursued them through the Early American primitives, through a lane of lithographs, and pellmell down the hall of prize-winning junior high school watercolors. When they reached the front door, they were fairly tumbling over each other.

I laughed triumphantly and then dashed about the building rooting out any brave souls who might have chosen to remain. I discovered two—though not brave—crouching beneath their desks in the administrative department. I sent them fleeing out the back door into the gathering crowd.

When I returned to the front windows, I saw Lieutenant Wymar, Dr. Barton, and a number of people who appeared to be officials gathered in conference at a safe distance from the building.

I watched them for five minutes. Ten. Twelve.

And then I went to one of the front doors, opened it, and stepped out.

A strong murmur rose from the crowd—possibly at the prospect of witnessing some poor soul blowing himself to bits—but I noticed that none of the civilized spectators departed per-

manently. They merely retreated, attempting in the process to preserve their line of sight.

I gazed at the assemblage for fully one minute.

And then I removed my thumb from the push button.

Nothing — of course — happened.

I quickly removed the wrapping from my box and extracted the alarm clock and the wire. I held them up for all to see. Then I upended the box, signifying that it was now indeed empty.

I put the entire mess into a convenient trash box nearby. I did not want to be arrested for litterbugging.

I was immediately—*immediately*—surrounded by a large number of angry men—of whom Lieutenant Wymar seemed typical. His face was definitely mottled, and he communicated in something of a strangled manner. "Just what kind of a practical joke is this?"

I glared. "It is no practical joke. I merely wanted to see Mayor Pettibone, but apparently that is a capital crime in this city."

"Now wait a minute!" he roared. "So maybe there wasn't any bomb in the box, but . . ."

"Of course there was no bomb in the box," I snapped. "There never has been and there

never will be."

"But the clock . . . the wires . . . the push button . . ."

"Is there a *law* against wires? Push buttons? Experimenting with timing devices happens to be my hobby." I wagged a finger under his nose. "The Civil Liberties Union shall hear about this. I shall sue. For a million dollars."

"Mister," Wymar announced wearily, "*you're* going to jail."

I showed my teeth. "Really? On what charge? It is I who have been hounded, abused. It is I who have been pursued by what clearly appeared to me to be a lynch mob *led* by officers of the law. I shall sue for *two* million dollars."

A small, worried man appeared at Lieutenant Wymar's elbow. "Now just one moment, lieutenant. Let's not get rash. We're having enough trouble with the budget as it is."

"Who are you?" I demanded.

He spoke almost apologetically. "Mayor Pettibone."

"Aha!" I said. "So finally you have come out of hiding. I've been trying to inform you that directly below my hotel window there is a series of holes in the street. When trucks rattle over them at night, I find it *impossible* to sleep. I demand that the city do something about them immediately!"

I struck my walking stick

sharply on the pavement, turned indignantly, and stalked away.

I rather expected to feel an authoritative hand on my shoulder, but apparently my abrupt departure had left them mired in indecision. A precipitous retreat often leaves the enemy in confusion.

I forced my way quickly through the crowd and within one hundred and fifty yards found a taxi. I entered it and directed the driver to a west side address.

However, after half a mile, I ordered him to stop before a supermarket. "I'll be out immediately," I said. "I have to make a small purchase."

I entered the supermarket and exited immediately by a rear door. In the alley, I tossed away my walking stick and hat. I pulled off my false beard, reversed my topcoat, making my attire brown rather than blue, and donned a cloth cap.

I walked down the alley and more than a block before I found another taxi. I settled in the back seat. "The airport, please."

I met Geoffrey the next day in St. Louis.

He showed me the three Utrillos, the two Picassos, and the two Modiglianis. "Everything worked perfectly. I hid in the lavatory. After you cleared out the building, I slipped into the gallery and shoved the pictures under my coat. When I ran out of the back of the building, nobody paid much attention to me. They thought I was just someone you were chasing." He poured us two drinks. "Suppose they had arrested you?"

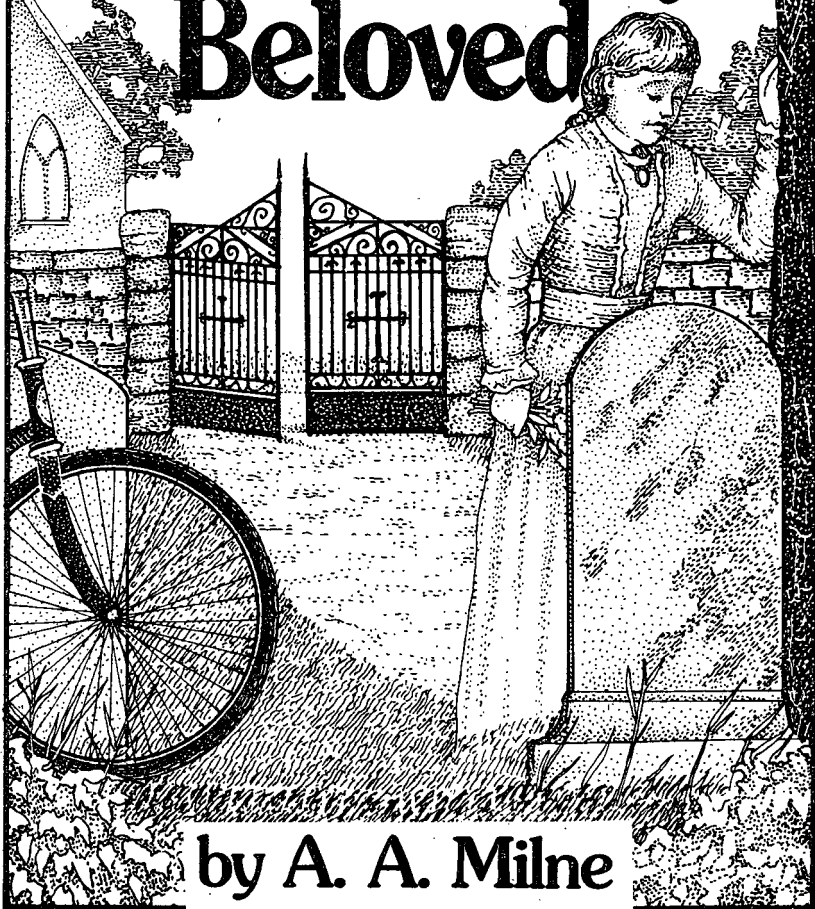
I shrugged. "They could have suspected anything they wanted to, but they could have proved nothing. My lawyer would merely have to point out that while everyone hounded me, some dastardly thief took advantage of the situation to steal some paintings."

He handed me my glass. "Do you think we can pull this off again?"

I smiled. "No. However, I am sure I shall think of something else next time."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

A Man Greatly Beloved



by A. A. Milne

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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I am fifteen, and extremely advanced for my years. This is not self-recommendation which, as the youngest of us has been told much too often, is no praise, but a *précis* of last term's report by Julia Prendergast, Headmistress, on Antonia Fell, Modern VI B. I am Antonia Fell, and most people call me Tony. I do not care for either of these names, and would rather have been christened Amaryllis and called Meriel for short, which is what I should have been if immersed when of riper years. In the novel which I am writing the heroine is so named and is the admiration of all. I have a Father and a Mother, as so often happens to young people, and a little brother of thirteen, which is not so inevitable. He was christened Charles Robert. Father calls him Robert and Mother calls him Paddy and I call him Bill, which is somewhat confusing for elderly visitors. However, life goes on just as if they weren't confused.

What I am going to tell you about is the Strange Case of John Anderson. This is not the my Jo one whose bonny brow was brent, but the one who came to live at Essington, which is our village.

I am not quite sure whether I ought to describe the village or Father first. This is the sort of thing which the experienced writer knows by instinct, and I don't, being inexperienced. Probably, whichever I do, I shall feel when I read it through afterwards that it ought to have been the other one. This will be a pity because it is too late when you only have one small exercise book, and the big one is being kept for the novel. So I shall take a chance and start with Father.

Father is the Vicar of Essington. Most of his opinions are out of date, as is natural to a vicar who has to believe what people believed before they knew that the earth was round and had taken millions of years getting that way; and so we don't agree on quite a lot of things. He doesn't know this because I am careful not to argue with him. There is no object in arguing unless you want to convince the other person that he is wrong. I argued with Prendy about getting off net-ball now I was in the Sixth, even if VI B. We remained of our own opinions still, but I did try to convince her that she was wrong, although without visible success. But if I convinced Father that he was wrong, then he would have to resign his living and we should starve, which would be lamentable for all. Of course, when my novel is published and makes a lot of money, then it won't matter so much. So I am really waiting for that. Meanwhile I go to church twice every Sunday, when I would much sooner be

writing my novel.

Father looks like an actor; and though it is a sad thing to say of one's father, a very bad actor at that. Perhaps if he were really an actor, I should say that he looked like a vicar and a very good vicar. He has a deep voice, and deep soul-compelling eyes; and his thick black hair, just beginning to go grey at the sides, is full of curls which he ought to have given to me, but hasn't, having wasted them on Bill. Altogether he is the sort of father you feel rather proud of and nervous about simultaneously, wondering whether the new visitor can take it. I mean some people say "What a handsome man for a vicar, my dear"; and others raise their eyebrows, as if he had gone too far. It depends on what you're used to. He is very eloquent in the pulpit, if you don't think about what he is saying but only how he says it, and in the home he makes everything sound just as religious and deep meaning, even if he is asking Mother where she left the Slug Death.

Mother is lovely in every way, and I am devoted to her. Bill is a nice little boy, but of course only a child. Mother calls him Paddy because he was the next best thing, Father having ordered another daughter. There used to be a book called Paddy-the-next-best-thing, and the reason why Father didn't want him was because he feared that vicars' sons always went to the bad. Bill hasn't gone to the bad yet, being a bit young for it and getting a prize for Divinity last term. Next term he will be at Harrow, which is where you generally begin going to the bad if you have any leaning that way. We shall have to wait and see.

Essington is a pleasant little old-world village, but the only building in it of antiquarian interest to the visitor is Ballards, a charming black and white cottage dating from the thirteenth century. A photograph of this will be seen on p. 81. That comes from *Rural Rambles Round England*, which was my reward for running half a three-legged race last year; and all my friends at school were greatly surprised when I showed them the photograph and told them that I had often been inside it. It is not often that one goes inside a photograph in a book. Father was more hurt than surprised because the author said nothing about his church being of antiquarian interest, and it quite spoilt his breakfast. He kept on asking for the book again in case a bit about it had got into some other chapter by mistake, and muttering to himself when it didn't. I was hoping that he would decide to take me away from school and send me somewhere where they didn't give prizes, but his dislike of

Rural Rambles Round England didn't seem to go as deep as that, and I went back at the end of September as usual. Of course what I am really hoping is that one day, in a later edition, the author will add: "My literary readers will doubtless wish to make an excursion to the famous vicarage where Antonia Fell, our great woman novelist, was born."

But it looks as though I shall have to wait a little for that.

2

It is now time that our great woman novelist introduced you to the hero of our story. But as I wasn't there all the time, being at school, I must explain first how it is that I can tell you about it. Authors don't do this as a rule, being unable. I read a book once about a woman dying alone on a prairie, and it went on for pages describing her last dying thoughts; and I did wonder, being very young at the time, how the author got to know them so well when he wasn't there and couldn't have been told by anybody. Of course I am aware now that this is the Art of the Novelist. But when he is telling you a true story, and is one of the characters in it, then the Art of the Novelist hasn't got so much scope, and he can't describe people's dying thoughts unless he says "Probably" or "It may well be." Of course his Art encourages him to touch up conversations a little, particularly anything which he said himself, and I shall probably do this, but you will have to guess for yourselves what my characters are thinking. Except when I tell you of my own ruminations.

Well, Father is the vicar, and has to take a spiritual interest in everybody in the village, which is quite different from being nosy, but has the same result. And Father always tells Mother everything, mostly twice. So when Mother goes into the kitchen to see Rose (who is our cook and has been with us since I was born, which shows what a sweet thing Mother is), naturally they talk about everything including what Father said. In the holidays I spend a good deal of time in the kitchen because I shall be living in a little flat in Chelsea one day doing my own cooking, and Rose and I are very great friends in consequence. So I really know everything, including when Father gives Mother a melodious cough meaning "Not before the child."

I was only ten when old Mrs. Hetherington died, but of course I remember her well, and I remember my excitement when I heard

that Ballards had been sold, and wondering who the new owner would be, and whether he would have any great influence on my young life; because Ballards is the sweetest cottage, and I was always in and out of it when Mrs. Hetherington was alive, and she left me a moonstone necklace which I used to wear in bed because I was too young to wear it in the daytime, and Father wanted to lock it up until I was older; but Mother said "Who would look in a child's bedroom for jewels?" and as the answer was Nobody, I was allowed to keep it under my handkerchiefs when I had any, which is why I wore it in bed when nobody but myself could see; but I don't now, that sort of excitement wearing off very quickly.

(I fear that my memories have run away with me, and I shall try to make my sentences shorter in future.)

Ah me!

How young one was!

"A Mr. John Anderson," said Father at breakfast on that well-remembered morning. He made it sound like the Archbishop of Canterbury.

"Cool! I bet he stinks," said Bill.

Bill had just inherited this unlovely word from one of the choir-boys, and couldn't be separated from it. Father told him to leave the room and not come back until he had learnt to talk like a gentleman. He went out, and should be there still, but being in the middle of his porridge, he began to cry, and Mother brought him back. He was only eight. The conversation was then resumed.

"Married?" asked Mother.

"I assume so," said Father, as if this state were natural. Little did he know that his only daughter would never marry, an author's books being her progeny.

"When do they move in?"

"Any moment, I understand. The house is in perfect condition, of course."

"Shall I still be allowed to go there, Mummy?" I asked.

"When I have called, darling, and if Mrs. Anderson invites you," said Mother.

"When will that be?" I piped. I am afraid I was very young then, asking all these silly questions, but I want my readers to feel that I am hiding nothing from them.

"Next holidays, perhaps," said Mother.

That's the worst of school, it interrupts the holidays so ceaselessly. I said, "Oh dear," and changed the subject, not caring to

think of the coming term.

But I couldn't wait all that time. So in the afternoon I got on my bicycle and rode over to Ballards, which is only three minutes away on a bicycle, and there was Mr. John Anderson and a large furniture van, and the one was superintending the unloading of the other. There were furniture men, too, but they had aprons, so one knew at once which was Mr. Anderson. He was the very big, elderly one.

"Good morning," I said to him.

"Good morning," he replied.

"Are you Mr. John Anderson?" I asked.

"I am," he said.

"I am Miss Antonia Fell," I announced.

He gave me a funny little dip of the head, not having a hat on. He had a sad sort of face, not unhappy-sad, but wistful-sad, like a spaniel's when you have to explain that you can't take him for a walk. I think it is possible that Alfred, Lord Tennyson's cocker spaniel wanted to be taken for a walk just when his master was beginning "Tears, Idle Tears," and it was this which gave it that yearning sadness.

"My father is the vicar of this parish," I said rather grandly. People generally say, "Oh" when I impart this information, but there are many ways of saying it. I should describe his as really wondering more if the wardrobe could possibly make its way into the house, and what he would do if it couldn't.

"Are you married?" I asked.

"No." He was silent for a long time, as if thinking of something else, and then said, "Are you?"

"No," I replied. I didn't say that I was bound to celibacy, not having decided on this at that time, but I did explain that I was only ten, and that in England one couldn't be married until one was fourteen, though in hot climates like India it was different. He didn't seem to know this. Of course I see now that he may have been still wondering about his wardrobe.

I stood, leaning over my bicycle and shifting about from one foot to another (I was very young and *gauche* in those days), and whenever he looked in my direction I smiled at him, and then I rang my bell once or twice to see if it was working, and at last he said, "Well, thank you very much for calling" and went into the house. So I got on to my bicycle and rode home. Do I need to tell my readers that I am bitterly aware of my lack of poise throughout

this encounter, and that though it was not until last Easter that Miss Prendergast informed my parents that I was much more poised this term, I had been uncomfortable about it long before that?

But five years ago I was a carefree child, and you can imagine with what pride I told them all about it at tea. But when I told them that he wasn't married, Father said that I was a very rude little girl to have asked such a personal question, a remark which I attributed at the time to jealousy because Father asks people if they are saved, which is much more personal.

Well, that was how I met Mr. John Anderson, and I didn't see him again until the Christmas holidays, as I had to go back to school. Although I was only ten, I was already going to boarding school, because I am so advanced for my years.

Of course by Christmas Father and Mother had got to know him, and he was what is called *persona grata* in Essington society. So now I will tell you what I knew about him, both from the inhabitants of the vicarage and my friends in the village.

He was fifty-five, and had retired from business; but as he hadn't told anybody what business he had retired from, it was thought to be something that one wouldn't want to linger on in conversation. Like suspenders. Because when at a dinner party one of the guests says "I remember when I was Governor of the Bermudas," it is rather a falling-off, and embarrassing for all concerned, if you say at the end of his story "That reminds me of when I was making suspenders." Far better to remark, "Of course in the business world we often get examples of what you were saying. I remember in 1923," leaving it possible that you were Lord Mayor of London in 1924.

This was the first time he had lived in the country, he had always wanted to, but if you're in business in the City you cannot unless you go up to London every day, which isn't living in the country, and isn't really country if it is as near to London as that. Of course he might have gone to Nottingham and made lace like the Beaver, but somehow we were sure that London had been his commercial home. And he had brought a man and his wife from London to look after him, a Mr. and Mrs. Watkins. He had only engaged them a few weeks before coming to Essington, so all their confidences revolved round His Lordship. Mr. Watkins had been with His Lordship for years and years, and had only left him because he wanted to be with Mrs. Watkins; but when you asked him what Lordship, he suddenly remembered that he hadn't polished the silver, and

you had to run along.

Well, that was all we had found out by Christmas, and now I suppose I ought to describe his looks because if you can't get a picture of him in your mind, this story might as well not have been written. It is very difficult to describe looks. The easiest way would be to say that he looked a little like an overgrown, slightly moth-eaten Uncle James, only then I should have to describe my Uncle James, which would be difficult again. Of course if he looked like the king or Mr. Churchill, then that would tell you all you want to know, but people are rarely so obliging.

He was big and slow-moving, and he walked with the fingers of his hands open. I don't know if that matters but he did. He had a big, clean-shaven face, rather like what Long John Silver's must have been. His hair was grey and sort of fuzzy-looking, as if it had been singed, and if you rubbed it, it would all rub off. He had those lost-dog eyes I told you about, but only when he wasn't really talking to you. When he was interested in what you were saying, his eyes were quiet and kind, and suddenly he would be quite boyish, and he would laugh very softly to himself, as if he didn't want to wake his memories. I told myself later on, when I understood life better, that he had lost somebody very near and dear, and was always remembering; and sometimes, if you were lucky, you could make him forget. So I never knew whether he was really a little deaf, as they said, or just remembering.

He was the kindest man I ever knew.

But of course I didn't really know him at all in those holidays, so I shall now pass lightly over two years and come to when I was twelve.

3

Father once preached for twenty minutes on the difference between "requisite" and "necessary," the chief one, which he didn't think fit to mention, being that they are spelt differently. My own feeling about this sermon was that it was neither. Of course one can't go on about goodness and Moses Sunday after Sunday, but I did think that he was getting a little out of his depth that morning through not knowing anything about the ways of writers. The author of "Dearly beloved brethren" used both words, either because (a) he liked the sound of them together; or (b) meant to cross out one of them when he had made up his mind which, but forgot; or (c) was afraid he was on the short side anyway, and didn't want

to waste anything. In the same way we need not ask ourselves why I have already written fifteen pages in my exercise book, and am only just beginning. Every real author knows that the first anxiety of literary composition is how one can possibly drag the story out so that it gets up to the sixth page of one's exercise book, and that the next is what one will do for another exercise book when the thirty-two pages are finished. Because one is suddenly filled with the sustaining knowledge that one could go on forever. So in future I shall try not to be so discursive, but confine myself to a straightforward narration of events. It will be difficult because I fear that I am of the same school as Mr. Henry Fielding and the Reverend Laurence Sterne, who evidently had all the exercise books they wanted.

We get most of our news of the great world from *The Spectator* and Miss Viney's Fred, Miss Viney's Fred being the more in touch with events of interest. Miss Viney lives at Rosemount, and I always go to see her on the first day of the summer holidays, which is partly politeness and partly raspberries. She is a very nice lame person, and gets along quickly with a stick in a sort of wriggle from side to side, which makes her seem more bustling than she really is. Fred is her nephew. He works in a bank in London; and owing to being said good-morning to by all sorts of influential people, gets to know things like how many husbands Myrna Loy has had and if we have a secret naval base in the Black Sea.

So Miss Viney asked if he knew anything about a Mr. John Anderson of London who had lately come to live among us, because of course we were all wanting to know if it really *was* suspenders. I suppose she must have described him very carefully, so it was not surprising that once again Miss Viney's Fred came to our help. Miss Viney showed me his letter, I mean the part she was letting me read.

It said:

"There was a Superintendent John Anderson who retired last year, one of the Big Four at Scotland Yard, would that be the man? Don't you remember the Luton case, the one that first put him on the map? And then the Cave Murders and the Girl in the Cistern, in fact most of the really gory ones. He was badly knocked about by a race gang just before he retired, and I should think, if he's your man, and he sounds just like it, that Essington must seem a haven of peace to him after all he's been through."

So *that* was who he was! Well, of course, as soon as I had settled

with the raspberries I went straight back and asked Rose about the Luton case and the Cave Murders and the Girl in the Cistern, because she reads it all in the Sunday papers and says it gets you out of your groove. I thought Luton was a place, I know it used to be when I was IV A, but it was the man's name, and he strangled his wife and buried her under the floor of the summerhouse, which is a very good place which nobody thinks of, and was pursued to Morocco; and I was too young to hear about the Cave Murders which were just murders in a cave, and Rose says that the girl whose body was found in the cistern wasn't murdered by the man who was hanged, but by somebody else. I suppose this often happens.

Well, you can imagine how interesting this was, and I just couldn't wait to find out if it was really our Mr. Anderson. So I got on my bicycle and went to Ballards. Of course I shouldn't have done this at my present age, but I was only a child.

Mr. Anderson and I were great friends by this time, and as soon as he saw me he led the way to the sort of little terrace behind Ballards, and Mr. Watkins brought out drinks. I had some orange squash with ice in it, and he had a glass of sherry. He asked me all about the last term, and I told him because I never mind this in the first week of the holidays, and only stupid people ask you about it in the last week. Mr. Anderson never did. And then, heartened by the orange squash but a little swallowy, I put my question to him. I must remind my readers that this was a long time ago, and I was only twelve.

"Mr. Anderson," I began, and swallowed.

"Yes, dear?"

"Are you the Superintendent Anderson who solved the Luton case?"

I only asked him about this one because I didn't want him to think that I knew about the one I was too young for, and even in those distant days I could feel how tactless it would be to ask him about the one when he hanged the wrong man.

He was just going to drink, and he stopped and put his glass of sherry very slowly down on the little table in front of us. Then he picked it up and drank it off.

"Who told you that, Tony?" he said in a sort of muffled voice.

"Are you?" I asked obstinately and very rudely.

He shrugged his big shoulders, and said, as if it had nothing to do with him, "I don't think it can ever be claimed that one man

solved a case. It wouldn't be fair to all the others who helped."

"But you can say that but for one man it *wouldn't* have been solved," I said rather cleverly.

"Well, yes, sometimes perhaps."

"And were you that man?"

"If you must have an answer—I suppose I was. Perhaps everybody wouldn't think so. There was a Sergeant Blythe who—" He broke off suddenly and said, "Are you greatly interested in crime?"

"No!" I said indignantly.

"Neither am I."

"I think it's silly."

"Most of it is," he agreed. Of course, he wasn't really agreeing with me because I meant it was silly to read detective stories like Bill, and he meant it was silly to be a criminal.

The silence got rather oppressive after that, so I said meekly, "I'm sorry I asked you, but I just wanted to know if that was who you were."

He nodded, and murmured, "Miss Viney's Fred," and I blushed, being liable to this in those days.

"I want you to understand," he said at last. "Look!" And he pointed.

"You mean Ballards?"

"Yes."

"It's just too lovely," I said, because it is the loveliest house I have ever seen.

"Can you understand that there are horrible things in the world which one mustn't talk about in its presence?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"And then—look!"

He brought his hand round in a sort of semicircle, and there was the garden, a glory of snapdragons and marigolds and mallows and hollyhocks, and beyond it the quiet meadow going down to the stream, with the brown cows gently swishing their tails, and the hum of bees in the peaceful blueness of the morning. I felt rather chokey, it was all so beautiful suddenly.

"Do you understand," he said, "that, sitting here, one just can't think of men and women, people like ourselves, shut away, seeing nothing but a little patch of sky through a barred window?"

"But if they were wicked," I said, "weren't you right to put them there?"

"Who is to say how wicked each one of us is?" he said gently.

"Who knows but God?"

Somehow when he talked about God like that it seemed real to me, as it never does in Father's voice.

"Yes," I said.

He poured himself a little more sherry, and drank it. Then he wiped his mouth and said:

"So that is why I am just Mr. Anderson here."

"Yes, Mr. Anderson," I said humbly.

"Or, of course, Uncle John to my little Tony, if she likes," he added, looking down at me with his funny smile.

"Oh!" I cried, and put my arms round him, and kissed him. It was the first time I had kissed him. I am not one of those girls who treat kisses lightly.

"Let's go and look at the raspberries," he said, getting up and blowing his nose.

Full though I was of raspberries, I went.

4

The news that our Mr. Anderson had been one of the Big Four soon became what Mademoiselle Stouffet (more widely known as Stuffy) would call *un secret de polichinelle dans le village*. At least, I think she would. For the benefit of those of my readers who never reached Modern VI B I will translate this as meaning that everybody now knew it but nobody talked about it. In case anybody thinks that it was I who betrayed Mr. Anderson's secret, I will merely remark that all Essington knows anything which Miss Viney's Fred has told her, and that it was because of me telling everybody that Mr. Anderson didn't want to talk about it that nobody did. For we were all too fond of him to disregard his wishes.

Nevertheless, it made a difference in our feeling for him. He had always been everybody's friend, but now he had a sort of halo of authority which made us look up to him. He took a great interest in cricket, though too old to play, and was ever ready to umpire in our matches, which is an unrewarding task, leading to acrimony and disillusion. Yet now he had only to lift a finger up, and all argument was stayed. This is unusual in village cricket. If Mr. Prossett of The Three Fishermen was having a little trouble round about closing time, which I understand is when you most often have a little trouble, a hasty message down the road to Mr. Anderson, and all was harmonious again. When he was unanimously

elected People's Churchwarden, it was at the back of everybody's mind that *he* wouldn't help himself from the plate. I don't wish to imply that churchwardens generally do this, but it is a thing which it is easy to suspect other people of doing when you haven't the chance of doing it yourself. And I blush for my sex (this is not a real blush, of course) to have to admit that it is mostly the women who suspect other women's husbands of behaving in this nefarious manner.

And to give one last example of our hero's position in the village I will add that when one of the inmates escaped from the County Asylum seven miles away, and was understood to be making in our direction, mothers just said calmly, "I suppose Mr. Anderson has been told," and went on with their washing. How different from the escape six years earlier when even I was not allowed to leave the vicarage unattended by Father and a sheepdog.

Of course, Uncle John had been elected vice president of the Cricket Club, the Football Club, the Horticultural Society, the Archaeological Society and the Girl Guides Association as soon as he arrived in the village, but these are honorary posts entitling the holder to subscribe not less than a guinea a year to the funds of the Society. Now he was promoted to president of most of these organizations and treasurer of all of them. In fact, he became not only the most loved but the most influential person in Essington. Some would add politely "After the vicar, of course." But I think that he had more influence than Father. When Father said anything, people thought, well of course, he had to say that because he's a parson. But when Mr. Anderson said it, he was just a man like themselves, and this made it more believable. His goodness was part of himself. To be with him was to feel it.

5

That was a short chapter because now I have to tell you that he died. He died quite suddenly a few weeks ago of a stroke. I don't know enough to explain what this is, but it is something which comes suddenly to people of a certain age. It happened on the last day of term, and the first news which greeted me when I got home was that my dear Uncle John was dead. I was very unhappy, even though it was the beginning of the holidays.

Father had a telegram from a solicitor in London asking him to make arrangements for the funeral, and saying that he would come

down as soon as he could, but it mightn't be for a few days. So we decided to give him a public funeral; by which I mean that we, and by "we" I mean the village of Essington, were going to pay for it and not take the money back from the solicitor. So one of the first questions to decide was what we were to put on the tombstone.

"I know!" I said suddenly at supper that night.

"What, darling?" asked Mother.

"'He was a good man and did good things,'" I said rather proudly.

Father cleared his throat musically and feared that he did not recognize the text. I was not surprised because his reading has been different from mine, so I explained that it came from *The Woodlanders* by Thomas Hardy, and was what Marty said of Giles Winterbourne. Father raised his noticeable eyebrows.

"Thomas Hardy?" he said, in the voice of one who had been expecting Isaiah. "An unsuitable choice for a churchyard, Antonia." Mother shook her head gently at me, meaning "Don't go on now. I'll explain afterwards." She often does this.

Mother said rather diffidently, "Couldn't you just put those few words from Daniel, dear? 'A man greatly beloved?'"

"Daniel X:11," said Father at once. "As it happens, I had already chosen that as my text on Sunday."

The funeral was on Saturday, and I could see him feeling a little hurt at Mother's suggestion because it was such a perfect text for a valedictory sermon, and if it were already ordered for the gravestone, everybody would know about it, and its announcement on Sunday would be less dramatic. Father has to think of these things.

Mother, who always knows what Father is thinking, said, "There's no real hurry, of course; we can't give orders for the stone until we have seen the solicitor."

"He has given me a free hand, my love, and it is the village's responsibility."

"But not to choose the date of his birth, dear."

"True," said Father, and he gave her a little smile, partly because he loves her (and who could help it?) and partly because he saw that now his sermon wouldn't be spoilt. So that was what we decided.

A funeral is a terrible thing, even if you don't care much about the person. The grave is so deep, and so concluding. He was my first dead friend, and I could not stop my tears. This is not a thing I like doing in public, but the whole village was there, and every-

body was crying, so I did not mind. And on Sunday Father's sermon sounded so beautiful that the tears came again; as they are coming now while I write this. But then they would come anyhow, I expect, even if I were writing about an imaginary person who died in my novel.

On Monday the solicitor arrived. He went into Father's study, and was there for a long time. When they came out, Father looked utterly shattered.

I think I shall put some dots here . . .

Because Mr. Anderson's real name was John Luton. And he strangled his wife . . .

I thought at first that he had told me lies about himself on that morning three years ago, and I couldn't have borne it. But if you read what I have written, you will see that he didn't. He was in prison for fifteen years, and when he came out he changed his name to Anderson, but I don't think he meant it to be the name of the man who had arrested him. Or perhaps he did. I don't know very much about him. Except that, when I knew him, he was a good man and did good things.

It still says on his tombstone "A man greatly beloved." But Father added a text from the 31st Psalm; and though I have often differed from Father, I felt that he had chosen the last perfect words for the story of my dear Uncle John.

"Into thy hands I commend my spirit: thou hast redeemed me; O Lord God of truth."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Coincidentally, "A Man Greatly Beloved" was also shown on the original Alfred Hitchcock television series. It was not, however, first published in AHMM. The story was aired on May 12, 1957. For the record, another Mystery Classic—Stacy Aumonier's "Miss Bracegirdle Does Her Duty," published in the April 1985 issue—was also an Alfred Hitchcock TV series selection.



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LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

“A private eye with a code may be nothing more than a pebble on the beach, but at least he stands out from the grains of sand.”

So goes the philosophy of Amos Walker, private eye and protagonist of Loren D. Estleman's five novels (with a sixth one due out in March) that feature this Detroit shamus. Walker narrates his own adventures, so his readers come to know him well. He's thirty-two when he first appears (*Motor City Blue*, 1980), tall, dark, and handsome, or so I deduce from a careful reading. He's divorced, and a confirmed loner since the death of his first and only business partner, an ex-cop who, as the story goes, “for-

got how to be a hard guy.”

Is Amos a “hard guy”? Yes . . . and no. His friends are few and far between, and so are his lovers. Walker is a Vietnam vet and a former Marine MP; he's also a dropout from the police academy, and on only the shakiest terms with the local boys in blue through a connection to a black lieutenant who was a boyhood friend.

Walker is a jazz lover, a heavy smoker, and a firm believer in the healing powers of scotch. He drives a beat-up Cutlass that harbors a more serious engine, an engine originally housed in a Cadillac body. He carries a gun on many occasions, and the trunk of his car holds a “spare.” He's not shy about opening his mouth, punching

back, or shooting to kill, when necessary.

So perhaps you could say Amos is a hard guy. Certainly he can carry the designation of "hardboiled." He can bounce back from a brass-knuckled interrogation (*Motor City Blue*), and have the guts to march into the den of his client—a retired, dying gangster—to give a report that's bound to displease the old man. He persists in his search for a cop-killer (*The Midnight Man*, 1982) who has nothing to lose, even though his path crosses those of the press, the police, and a mountainous man who's a modern-day bounty hunter. He climbs over corpses for another client (*The Glass Highway*, 1983) who is searching for the grown son he abandoned in childhood, encountering a contract killer, psychopath, and seductress. Violence marks another case (*Angel Eyes*, 1981), too, when a stripper claims she's soon to disappear—unwillingly, at that—and hires Walker to find her.

Is Amos Walker a hard guy? He gets beaten up with some regularity, and pushed around by the cops. He gets manipulated all too often by the very people whom he's hired to protect—his clients—until, finally, he seems to be the only innocent abroad in Loren Estleman's private-eye fiction.

And boy, does he have the tough-guy lines. Here's the smart-mouth Amos in a typical moment:

"'We don't serve beer.' She was a fat girl with a faint moustache, her middle cruelly bisected by an apron string like a strand of piano wire and her brown hair gathered up under a ducky white cap. She looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy in drag.

"'Do you serve water?' I asked.

"'When they ask for it. These days it costs us.'

"'Let's be extravagant.'

"'That mean you want water?'

"I said it meant I wanted water. It was the longest conversation I could recall ever having had on the subject."

See what I mean? Amos has all the good lines. And Loren Estleman's Amos Walker mysteries have all the right ingredients: fast-paced plots, surprise endings, grownup situations, memorable characters. Don't look for whimsy, sentimentality, or anything cute. But if you like the gritty private eye tale, do look for Loren D. Estleman's Amos Walker novels.

.....
(These books, and *Sugartown*, the most recent, were published by Houghton Mifflin Company in hardcover, and Pinnacle Books in paperback.)

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Margaret Truman has written another commercial suspense novel set in Washington. **Murder at the FBI** (Arbor House \$15.95, 225 pp.) has a boffo opening. A large group of tourists is being given the standard tour of the FBI, which includes a display of sharpshooting by an agent. This time, however, when the agent shoots at a paper target, out falls a real, and quite dead, body. A beautiful young FBI agent, Chris Suksis, and her recently-acquired lover, another hotshot agent, are assigned to the case. There's lots of action and behind-the-scenes detail in this one.

Stephen Dobyns' first "Charlie Bradshaw Mystery" was *Saratoga Swimmer*, and it was a hit. Charlie's back again in **Saratoga Headhunter** (Viking, \$13.95, 208 pp.), and fans will be no less thrilled with this one. Charlie is enduring hard times, driving a milk route for a friend with a hard-luck story and trying to make a living as a private eye. He grumbly shelters an ex-jockey who has been testifying for some government grand jury cases, but returns to his cabin to find the headless corpse of the guy. Now Charlie is in the middle, and there's danger and a terrifically zany car chase to spice up the story.

Toronto is Inspector Charlie Salter's beat, and in **Smoke Detector** author Eric Wright follows up Salter's introduction in *The Night the Gods Smiled*. Charlie's dead-ended career takes a turn when he's assigned to an arson-related homicide, and the fact that the victim was an unlikable and disreputable antiques dealer makes no difference to Charlie. While Charlie deals with minor domestic problems at home, he works toward the solution to the case, and a surprise it is! (Scribner's, \$12.95, 186 pp.)

Oriana Papazoglou has followed up *Sweet, Savage Death*, her highly-acclaimed first novel, with a second book just as appealing. **Wicked, Loving Murder** picks up the trail of Patience Campbell McKenna, serious writer and closet romance novelist (who's very successful at it, too) and sets her down once again in the middle of murder and mayhem. This time the goings on are in the cramped New York offices of *Writing* magazine, a sleazy, "family-run" business. Pay and her friends get involved when a corpse falls out of Pay's office closet, and a fellow romance novelist is subsequently accused of the deed. Papazoglou is brassy, witty, and a lot of fun to read. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$12.95, 182 pp.)

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Jeff Bridges and Glenn Close in *Jagged Edge*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



Jagged Edge gathers together as many sure-fire elements of mystery as a movie can hold: detection, suspense, fear, courtroom drama, and a psychological puzzle. Surprisingly, these elements come nicely together to make the most solid murder mystery to have shown up in the movies in years.

The core of the puzzle is that old Hitchcock favorite of the heroine trying to decide whether or not the attractive, successful man she is falling in love with might be a murderer. Jeff Bridges plays a wealthy young San Francisco newspaper publisher indicted for brutally murdering his wife. Since she controlled the family fortune, and left it to him in her will, he had a clear motive for killing

her. On the other hand, the details of the murder are so gruesome—a hunting knife is the weapon—that it seems inconceivable for someone of Bridges' class and manner to have committed it.

Glenn Close plays the female defense attorney who reluctantly takes Bridges' case. She grows convinced of his innocence, then begins to suffer from second thoughts about him. These thoughts heat up into fear that she is in danger of becoming the killer's second victim. There's an obvious feminist slant in the presentation of Glenn Close as a high-powered defense attorney. But she happily restricts her toughness to business, which she handles in a convincingly efficient and relentless way. Outside of court

she betrays womanly weaknesses as well as strengths, just like the plucky heroines of the 1940's who pioneered roles like hers.

The clues about Bridges emerge before and during his trial, which at first looks like nothing more than a setup by an ambitious young D.A. After a disturbing sexual exposé of Bridges, though, things begin to look bad for him—until there is another reversal in which it appears that the D.A. is suffering from a private obsession with destroying Bridges. Glenn Close is particularly torn by the D.A.'s behavior, since she once worked for him and has been carrying around a load of guilt for collaborating in his underhanded methods.

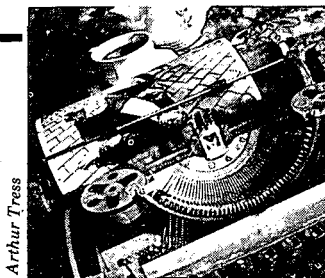
The beauty of the plot lies in the simplicity of its underlying question: is Bridges innocent or guilty? The more convincingly innocent his behavior, the more one somehow suspects that he is guilty; yet, when the D.A. turns up damning evidence against him, one begins to feel that he is innocent. By the end, the most unambiguous kinds of evidence seem confusing. Even though a lovely old Corona typewriter, for example, points almost unequivocally to the killer, doubts remain.

Like it or not, it's necessary to sit through the scarifying last scene in order to find out for sure. There is no violence or blood here—Hitchcock would have approved of the pure suggestions of terror used by the director. The highly theatrical final turn of the screw, in fact, recalls Anthony Shaffer's intricate stage thriller, *Sleuth*. Like Shaffer's work, *Jagged Edge* displays a high degree of polish throughout. The San Francisco locations, costumes, and camera work are all highly professional.

The same is true of the acting. Some reviewers have complained that neither Glenn Close nor Jeff Bridges offers us a spectacular performance. But this is to forget the conventions of movie mystery. The plot comes first, and spectacular performances tend to get in the way. Cary Grant, after all, does very little in Hitchcock's *Suspicion* beyond playing a likeable, devoted young husband. The less he reveals, the harder it is for Joan Fontaine—and for the audience—to know if he is planning to kill her.

Less can be more in mystery, whether it be less acting or less plot. The secret of *Jagged Edge's* success is that it has less of both.

THE STORY THAT WON



Arthur Tress

The September Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Michael Bernard of Cincinnati, Ohio. Honorable mentions go to Edith McDowell Edson of Pueblo, Colorado; H. P. Stabnitz of Markham, Ontario, Canada; Ellane Caveney of Owosso, Michigan; Nora St. Denis of Capron, Illinois; Willie Rose of Antioch, California; Helen Cavanagh of Spotswood, New Jersey; Wyc Toole of Melrose, Florida; Lana B. Stone of Iowa City, Iowa; Cleo C. Bresett, Jr., of San Antonio, Texas; Pam Domecq of Sacramento, California; and Renate E. Muller of Greeley, Pennsylvania.

A SIGHT FOR SORE I'S by Michael Bernard

It's been said a picture's worth a thousand words. This guy's vocabulary wasn't that broad. He needed a thousand words to write a cover letter. A veritable sultan of superfluosness.

Doesn't he look better there than behind me? I can't remember the countless stories he's butchered because of his ineptitude. He just never gave me a chance. A one-room schoolhouse had more class. As far as I was concerned, he was a shift key kind of guy.

He had more rejection slips than Snickers has peanuts. You would have thought he'd get the hint when his tax man suggested that the IRS frowned on in-house office deductions without sales. They considered it a hobby after a few years.

Whenever I went in for repairs, I could see those fancy electric typewriters snickering. The computer printers chattered endlessly about me. How much can one of royalty take?

I just got tired of him beating on me. What did I have to show for it? Injured pride, humiliation. My poems had no homes, my short stories floundered, my novels groveled.

I was at the end of my ribbon.

But as you have discovered, I finally got my revenge. He was killed by a runaway carriage. Right between the i's, of course.

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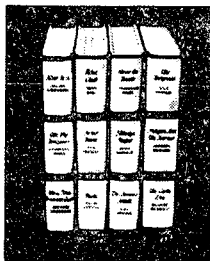
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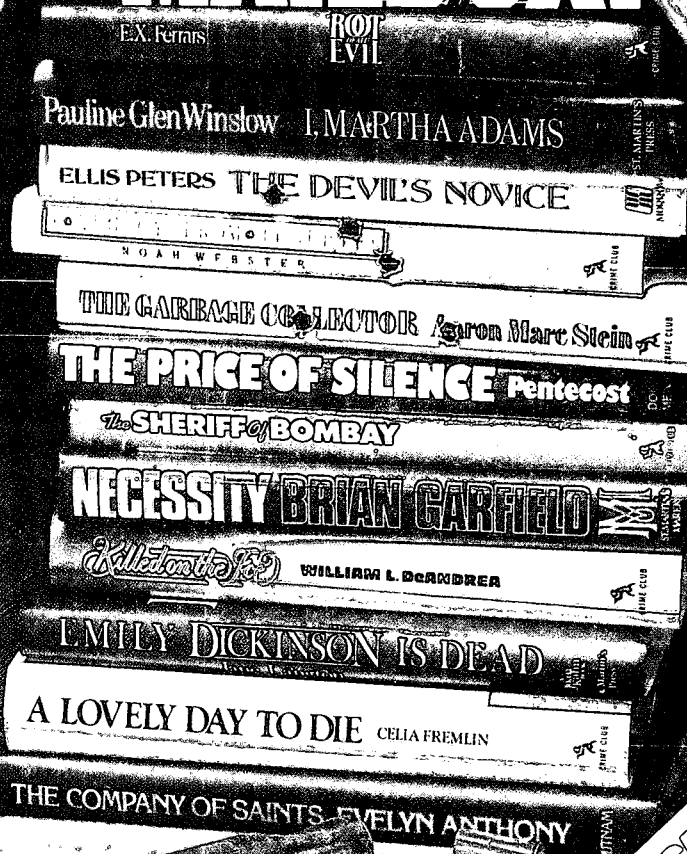
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